THE HILLTOP GIRL

BY

L. T. MEADE

2014.

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L. T. MEADE

Author of
'Dumps,' 'Wilful Cousin Kate,' 'A Bevy of Girls,'
'The Children of Wilton Chase,' &c.

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THE HILL-TOP GIRL.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE PINE-WOOD.

THE girls who lived on the hill had one advantage over those who lived on the plain. They, as Violet Primrose remarked, always looked down on them. From their heights, they could be superior, have more sunlight, as Daisy Primrose expressed it; and a better time, as Jasmine remarked. All these things were in a sense true, although the Primroses of Primrose Cottage were about as poor as poor could be; and the Massereenes of Castle Mary were so rich that money with them meant nothing at all.

There were three girls in the cottage, and three in the castle. The cottage girls were called after the flowers: Violet, Daisy, and Jasmine. Their surname, also, was that of one of the sweetest of spring flowers: Primrose; and the cottage had its

name, Primrose Cottage, just because old Mr Primrose, the father of the girls, chose to have it so a great many years ago, when Violet was only a tiny child and Jasmine a mere baby. It had been a desolate sort of place; in fact, it had been the chosen habitation of an old shepherd, who took shelter there in stormy nights with his dog Trust, and sometimes even brought his sheep to lean against the walls that they might not have to bear the full buffeting of the stormy blast.

But the shepherd was gone, and Trust lay at his feet, and the sheep were no longer to be seen in the neighbourhood, and the cottage had somehow developed into a pretty little home. It was a cottage still, but there were plenty of tiny rooms, and a big, wild sort of garden all around, and a few hardy apple-trees and a poplar or two, and even a wonderful willow-tree which gave the girls shelter under its branches when it did happen to be too hot on the top of the hill in summer.

But the great glory of the cottage, its one prominent characteristic, which caused it to differ from every other house in the neighbourhood, was the fact that it stood on one of the highest points in Warwickshire, and was therefore able to look down on its neighbours and have the grandest view in all the country-side.

Castle Mary, lying far away below in the hot plain, with the glowing sun baking upon it, and

the wind only whispering round it instead of sweeping clean through it and all about it, must have had, thought Violet Primrose, a poor time in comparison. Who so healthy as she and Daisy and Jasmine? What other girls in all the world ever did bring such enormous appetites to the homely food? What other girls in all creation slept so soundly, even in the lap of the fiercest storm that ever blew? And what girls had ever such a beloved father as old white-haired Mr Primrose, who had married late in life, whose wife had died, and whose office in the world was to be father and mother, brother and friend, to the three girls who lived with him?

No one was ever cross at Primrose Cottage, or in the least discontented.

'The view is too wide,' Daisy used to say. 'We see too much of the great world to be petty about anything,' Violet would remark. And even Jasmine followed in the train of her sisters, and was as good a child as could be found anywhere.

When this story opens the three sisters were aged respectively fifteen, thirteen, and twelve. They were well grown for their ages, and all three of them good-looking. Violet had the deep-blue eyes which ought to accompany her pretty name. Her hair was dark and soft and very thick; her complexion was of a creamy pallor which still further seemed to go with her name. Daisy was a buxom, comely girl, well developed for her age, with fair

hair and blue eyes. Jasmine was by common consent the beauty of the family. No one ever looked at Jasmine once without wanting to see her again; for her eyes were soft and starry like her name. She had all Violet's grace of appearance and manner, with more than Violet's share of beauty. But with her beauty there was a sort of worldliness, and a restlessness in her heart which the two elder sisters did not possess—at least not when this story first opens.

There were times when Jasmine would go to the brow of the hill and look down at Castle Mary, and wonder much what it was like to live in the plain, and to have no end of fun; to possess carriages and horses, and talk to gay men and women; to ride on spirited ponies, play tennis and croquet, wear fine dresses, and be thought much of by the people who lived there.

But up to her twelfth birthday Jasmine had very few opportunities of seeing much of the Massereene sisters, for they were mostly away, and half its time Castle Mary had no flag flying from the old tower and no fun going on within its walls. It was on Violet's birthday, however—Violet's sixteenth birthday, when she was absolutely fifteen years of age, and, as she herself expressed it, 'quite a woman'—that events began to move of a very stirring character. It is surprising how quickly the kaleidoscope of our lives changes

its pattern, and we find ourselves in absolutely new surroundings, with new thoughts and new feelings, and we realise that we have turned a page in the book of our existence, and can never, never by any possible chance turn it back again.

Violet's birthday came towards the end of May. This seemed almost a pity to her sisters. They thought that one named after the modest flower ought to be at least a March or April girl. But as they could not alter events, and as Violet's birthday had to be solemnised on the 25th of May, they did their best for the auspicious occasion, and always enjoyed themselves vastly. When, happy as your life is, there is a sort of sameness about it; when you get up every day all the year round at half-past six in the morning, and go to bed every night the whole year round at half-past nine; when breakfast is ready for you each morning at eight o'clock, and you eat your modest dinner at two o'clock, and during the busy working-hours of the day you study and practise on the old piano, and make some feeble water-colour sketches, and garden with great vigour, and walk up and down the steep hills like the most sure-footed pony in the world, you have to make the most of small pleasures. Not that a birthday is really a small pleasure. It is a very great event for every one, marking as it does a milestone in life.

But in the Primrose family birthdays were thought too important to be even lightly spoken about. There were only four, for instance, in the year—father's and the three girls'—and each birthday had to be planned and arranged for and surrounded with a sort of sweet mystery; for the owner of the birthday must know nothing about what its special festivity was to be until it arrived. The presents were all secrets beforehand; the very food set on the table had to be different from that of the other days; different china was used, different table linen; the best silver was got out; if possible, flowers of every sort and description decorated the board. Then there were speeches, and cowslip wine was drunk, and the queen of the day was petted and fêted and fussed over until her little head was almost turned.

It happened in the special year of grace 1902 that Violet Primrose had a birthday long to be remembered. To begin with, the day was a glorious one; for summer had come in with a burst—hot, very hot in the plain, and just agreeable weather on the hill-top. On this day there was no wind, even on the very top of the hill, and this fact alone was worth commenting upon. So warm was it that the three flowers, as their father called them—Violet, Daisy, and Jasmine—were able to appear at breakfast in white dresses. Each little face looked almost more radiant than that of its sister-face, and old Mr Primrose thought

'To think,' said Violet, 'that I am fifteen years old!'

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there never were three such darlings in all the world.

The presents—the great events of the day—were not to be distributed until tea-time, but of course there were to be no lessons on Violet's great birthday; so after breakfast the three went to seat themselves under the shade of the yew-tree. They were fond of imagining that they suffered from the heat, although no one else would be hot living at such a height. So now Violet panted a little, and Daisy followed in her steps, while Jasmine, who never could pretend, sat out in the sun, and looked longingly down upon the plain.

'To think,' said Violet, 'that I am fifteen years old! I shall be a woman in next to no time.'

'You are almost a woman now, Vi,' said Daisy. 'You are so slim and tall; you will have to get your dresses lengthened in about a year. What fun it will be when you are quite, quite a woman, full-grown, and have seen the world!'

'Have seen the world!' said Violet. 'What do you mean by that, Daisy? I see the world every day, and, oh! it is a wide view and a lovely one,' she continued, opening her deep-violet eyes as she spoke and looking out across the wide-spreading plain.

'You have never really seen the world,' said Jasmine from her place just outside the bower.

'Nonsense,' said Daisy; 'what can you know about it?'

'I have read about it,' said Jasmine, 'in the *Vicar of Wakefield*. The world is a very nice place; it is silly for us girls to pretend that we know all about it, when we know nothing.'

'That is not true,' said Violet. 'I know a great deal.'

Jasmine looked perturbed. She got up and came quite within the shade of the yew-tree.

'I want to say something,' she remarked. 'I am a little girl, quite young compared to you, Violet. I am only twelve; I sha'n't have a birthday for at least six long months; but although I am young, and although I love my home, I am not silly.'

Jasmine tossed her head. The other two looked up at her.

'I am not a bit silly,' she continued, and she reached up her hand and pulled down a great branch of the old yew-tree, and began to swing herself gently backwards and forwards. 'For instance,' she continued, 'it's the very height of silliness—is it not?—to pretend that you are so hot on the twenty-fifth of May on the very top of this high hill that you have to come in here for shelter. I call it quite foolish, and I am going back to the sun. There are other things that are foolish too, and I think if I were you, Violet, I wouldn't make-believe any more.'

She turned her back and walked out of the bower. She went far away from her sisters now, and sat down on a bank of short grass. The sun was shining on it with such power that it was quite hot, and Jasmine liked the heat. She cuddled slightly into herself, as it were, and allowed the rays of the sun to beat on her back, and said softly, under her breath:

'Now I am happy; now I am really warm.'

Violet and Daisy within the bower talked about her in a puzzled way for a minute or two, but they had not any real clue to her thoughts, for they were neither of them particularly fond of reading, and had voted the *Vicar of Wakefield* a dull old book, and had not cared to study it. There were plenty of wonderful and great books in their father's celebrated library within the cottage, but they had not read any of them yet, for their time of reading had not come. Jasmine, being more precocious, had read several, and the *Vicar of Wakefield* in particular. She had also read another book, and she was thinking of it now as she sat on the sun-warmed bank. This was that beautiful story-book, *The Fairy Tales* of Hans Christian Andersen.

She was remembering at this moment that tiny little princess who, unlike herself, lived, not on the hill-top, but down in the depths of the blue ocean. She lived there in a coral home with her sisters, and the king her father, and the old

queen her grandmother. Jasmine had read this story many times.

There were six little sisters in the Sea King's home in the ocean, and there were only three sisters on the hill-top; but somehow Jasmine felt a sort of aching sympathy for the ocean sisters. They were more privileged than she was. To each of them there came a time when she was permitted to fasten oyster-shells on her tail, and to come up and see the world. Jasmine wanted most earnestly at that moment to go down and see the world.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet. She began to strain her bright eyes and to look down and down eagerly.

There was a commotion at Castle Mary. One carriage after another was coming up the stately old drive, and people were getting out. Oh! if only she had a telescope to watch them. By looking very hard she could discover who were men and who were women and who were children. There seemed to be a great many of all sorts—a great many men, several fine ladies—she was certain they were that—and several children. Her heart began to ache; she felt discontented. This was a dreadful day, certainly, for the serpent to enter the Eden of Jasmine's life—on the day when they were celebrating Violet's birth. Jasmine determined to banish her discontent and go away by herself. She called out to her sisters:

'I am going a bit down the road and into the pine-wood,' she said. 'I'll be back again in time for dinner. Oh, don't trouble, girls; I am all right; but I must just have a walk. I am not so hot as you are, remember.'

The elder sisters, who were very busy discussing the all-important subject of their summer dresses, let her go without comment. But as she was rushing through the cottage—the nearest way to get through the garden to the other side—and then past the wicket-gate and down the sloping path to the pine-wood, she met her father.

'Ah, Jasmine!' he said, 'and what are you doing now? Have you been browsing in my library as usual?'

'Oh no, father,' answered Jasmine. 'I have not been reading; I could not read on a beautiful day like this.'

'It is a glorious day,' said the old man. He laid his hand on Jasmine's shoulder, and then, raising her chin, looked into her sparkling little face. 'You have been reading Nature's book, my child:

> And Nature, the dear old nurse,
> Took the child upon her knee,
> Saying, "Here is a story-book
> Thy Father has written for thee."'

But Jasmine flung herself away almost petulantly. 'I—I am a bit cross,' she said, 'and I don't want Nature or the story-book to-day. I am going

into the pine-wood. I will be back in time for dinner.'

'Yes, my child; be sure you are in time. It is such a beautiful day,' said Mr Primrose.

He let Jasmine go. He felt puzzled for a minute, but he did not understand. Once free, Jasmine ran fast. She was glad of the exercise. She soon got warm—almost too warm. Her discontent vanished. By the time she reached the pines she was in an ecstasy once again with all the world. She was so young and strong, and the sunshine was such a glad thing, and it was nice to remember that this was really one of the red-letter days of her life; that Violet was really fifteen, and never, never in the wide world could be fourteen any more; and that there would be a specially good dinner with a sort of pudding—hungry Jasmine must enjoy it—and a delightful tea later on, and the giving of the presents, and the crowning of Violet as queen of the day, and father's speech, and Violet's reply, and the little surprise which she (Jasmine) and Daisy had been secretly preparing; a little surprise which was to cover Violet with glory and delight. Oh, how hard they had worked over it!

These things were all agreeable, and a little girl of twelve can soon forget her discontent and enjoy the full happiness of the present hour.

This was Jasmine's case. So she went singing through the pine-wood, looking like a little prin-

cess of the woods or a dryad out of one of the old oak-trees as she sauntered on singing to herself.

> So she wandered away and away,
> With Nature, the dear old nurse,
> Who sang to her night and day
> The songs of the universe.

All of a sudden Jasmine drew up short. A girl was coming to meet her through the wood. The girl was riding a rough pony. She had a quantity of thick, somewhat coarse brown hair hanging in masses of confusion, half-curling, half-tangled, down her back. The girl had large brown eyes like saucers, and a slightly flat face, her nose being a little wide and her mouth a trifle large. But for all that she had one of the gayest, most fascinating faces in the world; and Jasmine stood stock-still to watch her as she came up. The girl seemed to be thinking of nothing in particular as she rode slowly up and up the stately avenue formed by the pine-trees. Jasmine was able to see her from a long way off. She noticed how well the girl rode and how upright she was, and she thought to herself that there could be nothing so lovely in the world as brown saucer eyes and a rather flat face. Jasmine's heart beat hard. She had been all the morning preparing for the thing which suddenly took place.

The girl ambled up quite gently and carelessly. Then she saw Jasmine standing leaning against

the upright stem of one of the pines, and drew her pony in with a jerk.

'Whoever are you—a fairy or a girl?'

'I am a girl,' said Jasmine at once. 'I am Jasmine Primrose. I live up there.' She pointed with her finger in the direction of the top of the hill. Then she said abruptly, 'Who are you?'

'Maggie Massereene—the queerest, wildest, most reckless elf in the whole world. I have run away from the others; they are too grand for me. I say, Jasmine Primrose, take me up to your mountain-top; lead the way; I am just dying for an adventure. Show me the way up, or Sambo and I may lose ourselves among the pines.'

'Oh, you can't,' said Jasmine; 'the paths are all as straight as avenues.'

'I know,' answered Maggie; 'but then there are thousands of avenues, and I don't know which one to take. I want to get to your cottage—I have heard of you, of course. You are one of the three hill-top girls—we always call you the hill-top girls, and wonder when you will come down from your heights.'

'We come down every Sunday,' said Jasmine in a demure voice. Her cheeks were burning, however, and her pretty starry eyes shining.

'You are remarkably good-looking,' said Maggie Massereene; 'do you know that?'

Jasmine at once sighed and smiled.

'Everybody is good-looking at home,' she said

suddenly. 'It's all beautiful at home, although we are poor.'

'What does that matter?' said Maggie. 'I am glad I found you. Now then, lead the way; I want to follow. Sambo wants to follow too.—You would like some food, wouldn't you, Sambo, and to see the stables that belong to the hill-top, and the other horses that live in the hill-top stables—wouldn't you, Sambo mine? Say that you would, beauty.'

The pony pricked his ears; for the girl, as she spoke, bent over him, and let her shaggy, wild, unkempt hair fall about his head and shoulders until her own face was completely hidden. Then she sat bolt upright, for Jasmine had placed herself full in her path.

'I say'—— began Jasmine.

'Yes; what is it, elf? I will call you elf whether you like it or not. How dared you stand by that tree quite motionless in the midst of the pines? I am certain sure you belong to them; you're the Spirit of the Pines. Come now, elf—out with the truth.'

'No, I am not,' said Jasmine, who found herself at once blunt and determined that this marvellous Maggie should know the exact truth, and without delay. 'I am just Jasmine Primrose—no more and no less; and there are no stables on the hill-top, and no horses. We are just poor people; you had better know.'

'Lovely—golloptious—scrumptious—all the rest!' laughed Maggie. 'Oh, don't you love Lear's nonsense-books? I adore them! I quote from them at any minute. Now this is runcible—and you're a runcible girl. Come, come, come—I like you for being true, and I love you for being poor. Lead the way, Jasmine, or whatever you call yourself; lead, and I will follow.'

Jasmine had no compunctions any further. A girl who could make use of words like 'runcible' and 'golloptious' was not to be feared—she was to be adored; and brown saucer eyes were the sweetest in the world. So Jasmine sprang lightly on in front, getting, it must be owned, over some rough ground which even Sambo the pony objected to; but in the end they reached the top of the pine-wood; and then the girl, who told Jasmine that she might call her a runcible girl if she liked, drew a deep breath and looked around her.

'I do declare—this is fine!' she said. 'But where is your house? I don't see it.'

'We are nowhere near the top yet,' said Jasmine. 'We'll have to go up and up this path—it's merely a mountain-path, but it's jolly good fun climbing it, I tell you; and when we've gone nearly half a mile we'll find the beginning of the garden, and then you and I and the pony will have to go up a very narrow path. I am afraid you can't go any farther without dismounting, for

I don't think the pony can walk through the house. There is no other way to where the front view is—the greatest view in all the country. We can see your house in the plain from there, and all the rest.'

'Well, go on—go on,' said the girl; 'it is great fun. I love to see you climbing on in front; and how you do put your back into it! You must be strong. Oh, what would Laura say? And as to Juliet—she would be fit to kill herself!'

'Who are Laura and Juliet?' called back Jasmine as she toiled on in front.

'My sisters; one is older than I am, one younger. They are frightfully dandified. They're chock-full of airs and graces, both of them. There are times when I can't abide them—when I must get away from them.'

'But tell me,' said Jasmine, turning round and standing still so suddenly that poor Sambo nearly stumbled in endeavouring to avoid treading on her, 'are you the people who have just come to Castle Mary?'

'Yes. Why, how can you know?'

'I saw you. I look down every day on the plain, and I always notice your castle. Sometimes the flag waves from the flagstaff, but most times it doesn't. It waved to-day, and a lot of you came back; I watched you. Then I turned sulky, and I ran away into the pine-wood.'

'What a queer, runcible elf you are!' said

Maggie. 'Of course, we did arrive just then. And what do you think I did?—rushed away from all their grandeur, and sought my own room, and let my hair out of its plaits and rumpled it into wild confusion, and got into my old brown habit, and made for the stables, and saddled and bridled old Sambo myself; and so—and so I got to the pine-wood. Oh, it is jolly to see you!—as refreshing as very fresh air is. You are like your own mountain—you are queer and pretty and golloptious and scruggeous, and all the rest! I mean to spend the day with you. May I?'

'Oh, I don't know. I should love you to, of course. I would give anything in the world for you to stay; but it's a birthday.'

'Gracious, how solemn you look! And why should I be turned from the hill-top because it just happens to be a birthday? I can tell you, once you get me up this awful climb, I shall not go back in a hurry. Now then, lead the way, elf, and the pony and I will follow.'

Jasmine, all excitement, and restored to the most tremendous state of high spirits, continued her climb. As the girl behind praised her, and exclaimed in wonder at her agility, she began for the first time to consider that she was performing an extraordinary feat; for, having climbed hills since she could toddle, she naturally thought nothing at all about them. To come from the plain to the hill-top was no more to Jasmine than an ordinary

walk on the flat road would have been to an ordinary girl; in fact, neither Jasmine nor Violet nor Daisy could have walked with any pleasure on flat roads, so terribly would they have missed the ever-altering view.

The girl with the pony, however, notwithstanding the fact that she was riding, groaned and exclaimed at the hardness of the road once or twice.

'You will have to move from your hill-top, pretty Jasmine,' she said. 'You must get into the world and see how jolly it is for some people. You will never, never be able always to stay on the hill-top.'

'But you don't like the world. You ran away from it the minute you could,' answered Jasmine.

'Right you are. I don't like all of it, but I like some of it. I'll tell you some day the sort of things I like and the sort of things I don't like. But you ask Laura what she thinks of hill-tops, and you get to talk to Juliet. Juliet's a little prig; she is always saying that old tag, "Papa, potatoes, prunes, and prisms," under her breath. I see her at it, and I joke her about it. I know when she comes to "prisms," for then her mouth gets into the correct position.'

'Oh, don't make me laugh!' said Jasmine. 'And here we are at last,' she continued, as they climbed the last ascent and reached the wicket-gate which led to the garden.

It took but a short time longer to go up and up the winding path, and then there came a minute of intense excitement for the youngest of the Primroses when Maggie descended from her pony, arranged her habit with a quick grip of her fingers, tied Sambo to one of the gnarled old apple-trees, kissed him just below the star on his forehead, and then marched through the house with Jasmine by her side.

The two other girls were just coming in when they met Jasmine and her friend.

'Violet!' cried Jasmine, 'this is Miss—Miss Massereene; I met her in the pine-wood.'

'I am *Maggie* Massereene; for goodness' sake, don't call me miss!' cried she of the saucer eyes. 'I am just the queerest, wildest, maddest thing on earth; and this is the hill-top, and you are two more elves, I do declare! I never felt so pleased in my life. What rare luck forced me up to my bedroom and into my old habit and on to the back of Sambo, and then directed me to meet your sister, is more than I can tell. But I've come, and—and she is an old duck, a real runcible girl; and I'm never going to part from you three elves any more.'

Violet was always very polite; Daisy invariably followed in Violet's steps; but Jasmine was the one with character, and Jasmine was Maggie's first friend. Maggie looked at all three, and made up her mind on the spot that they were quaint and

queer, quite fascinating, and out of the common; that their dress was the most old-fashioned she had ever beheld; that their hair was beautiful, but arranged nohow; that their manners were quaint and unlike those of any other girls she had ever come across; and that they—Jasmine in particular—belonged to her, and that she meant to keep them as her special friends for ever.

Meanwhile, Jasmine ran quickly into the house. The first thing to do was to interview Betty in the kitchen. Betty Prime was the general factotum and maid-of-all-work of the Primroses. She was fifty years of age, and a little hard of hearing. She adored her young ladies, but at the same time ruled them with a rod of iron.

'They be very good children,' she thought, 'but that spoiled as never was. Their father, poor man, would have done better if he had read the words of Bible Solomon, and applied the rod at times. He was a rare saint of a man, was old Mr Primrose; but them young ladies were too queer to be considered at times even genteel.'

Betty had great ideas about gentility. Her mistress had been, as she expressed it, 'a member of the real quality.' She walked quietly; she dressed neatly; she spoke in a low, gentle tone. She died, dear, blessed angel; and the children lived. They grew up, 'just as the flowers do,' thought Betty; 'but only like the wild-flowers,

without never a bit of training, and Miss Jasmine, in particular, so contrairy as to be a real worrit.'

But though Betty often spoke in a sour manner, and refused the girls' desires, and kept their best wardrobe under lock and key, and herself doled them out their very scant pocket-money, nevertheless she adored them. On a birthday, too, she was, as a rule, in the best of good tempers, and she always took the cooking department under her special patronage on that day. It was a very brave Primrose who would dare to beard this lioness in her den on the occasion when she was preparing a birthday dinner. But Jasmine, goaded on by the thought of Maggie Massereene, and what Maggie would think of their dear, simple fare and simply arranged table, boldly defied custom, and banging the kitchen door open, slammed it behind her.

'Now, get out of this, Miss Jasmine,' called Betty, who was bending over a confection that was in the oven at that moment. 'There!' she cried, 'if you ain't gone and spoilt it—letting in the cold air on it when it was rizzin up and up as beautiful as a spirit. Now it'll sink, and not be fit to eat. Out you go this minute, Miss Jasmine. I can't attend to you now whatever your vagaries.'

'But you must speak to me, Betty,' said Jasmine, holding her ground and standing with her arms akimbo. I have something most important to tell you, Betty. Now, do be nice—do, like a darling old duck!'

'I ain't no darling old duck, but a cross, worrited old woman. Get you out of this, Miss Jasmine. Oh! and for goodness' sake, wherever have you been?—your dress torn and stained with mud, the dress you put on so pretty and fresh only this blessed morning! However am I to wash and bake and brew for you when you treat me like this? Darling old duck indeed! A poor old woman with a leg in the grave, more like—and your doing, too. For shame on you, Miss Jasmine!'

'Oh Betty, do leave off grumbling! There'll be dinner in a minute; and it's Violet's birthday, and you know you would do anything for Violet, who never spoils her dresses, or—or goes on as she ought not. I am the wild one, and you know it—you know it, Betty; but I always come to you when I am in a scrape, and I am not one scrap afraid of you, however much you may try to frighten me. So here goes now, Betty. There's a young lady come home to—to dinner'——

'There's a young—what?' said Betty.

'A young lady. You needn't look at me as though you meant to snap my eyes out. She is one of the Massereenes; her name is Maggie. She's as rich as Crœsus; and there's her pony just outside the back door, who'll want a bunch of carrots presently; and—and you must lay a place for her at the table, and you might make the table look its very best; and oh, Betty! oh,

Betty! please tell me just this once—what *is* there for dinner?'

'Roasted potatoes,' said Betty, 'roasted mutton, a dish of cabbage, plum-pudding, and perhaps a sort of a queer thing that was meant for a cake; but it ain't fit to touch now, for you've spoilt it.'

'Oh no, it isn't spoilt,' said Jasmine, restored to instant peace of mind and good humour by Betty's description of the dinner. 'I will look for myself.'

She opened the oven door. Within was a wonderful creation—rich, crisp, odorous with spices and all sorts of good things; a cake quite dark with regard to its sides, but of a delicate pink on its face, with mysterious letters, very badly executed, sprawling over it.

'I know—I know; glorious, beautiful—a birthday cake!' said Jasmine. 'Oh Betty, you are a witch, and I love you! Why, what do you mean now?'

'Nothing at all, dear, except that I want your room, not your company. As to this cake, no Massareene that ever walked shall touch it; for I ain't, so to speak, friendly with them folks at Castle Mary; and the plum-pudding is fair enough and good enough for any one, and there's the roast mutton and 'tatoes and cabbage. Now, get you off. The cake'll be for tea and not for dinner. A Miss Massereene, indeed, eat Miss Violet's birthday cake!'

Poor Jasmine had perception enough to know

when she was vanquished. She left the kitchen a little sadly, but not altogether too depressed even about the cake. The food was good enough. Oh, she was so hungry; and would not she, notwithstanding the fact that Maggie called her an elf, plough into that plum-pudding?

CHAPTER II.

WREATH OF RED MAY.

NOTWITHSTANDING his secluded life, Mr Primrose had as good manners as that celebrated person the Vicar of Wakefield, whose very name he bore. The Vicar had also been a Primrose, and the Primroses were gentlefolk, every one of them, from father to son and from mother to daughter; and Betty had a reason when she expressed so boldly that she did not like the Massereenes, and Mr Primrose had a far greater reason than Betty had the least idea of for disliking the rich grand family who lived on the plain.

But Maggie Massereene, at least, was innocent, and she was his guest. When they sat down to dinner, and when Betty lifted the cover from the roast leg of mutton, and revealed a huge dish of smoking roast potatoes, and another equally big dish of young cabbage, Mr Primrose looked round the board, bowed his head, and uttered a quaint but simple grace, and then began to carve and help the viands with the manners of a prince.

Maggie was enjoying herself immensely. The mountain air had given her an appetite; the

plain food, from its rarity, tempted her. She ate and praised, and praised and ate. Where did Mr Primrose get this mutton? And oh, what potatoes! Were they grown in his garden? He replied gracefully, rather repressing her words of admiration. Violet, who always took her cue from her father, for she could read him like a book, and was beyond doubt his favourite child, now exerted herself to talk to Maggie.

Violet, as queen of the day and as the eldest girl, sat at the head of her father's table. Notwithstanding her old-fashioned dress, and her hair arranged in a prim, old-world style, Maggie could not but notice that the hill-top girl had very nice manners. She talked about the country and the walks they took, and what pleasure they had sometimes in riding old Dodson's pony.

'We get him sometimes in the summer,' said Violet, 'and we take him turn about, and go—oh, miles away. Once we even went as far as Warwick. We saw the castle, and had a picnic just under the ruins, and came back, oh! so late and so tired.—Don't you remember, father, it was on the occasion of your last birthday?'

'You think a lot of birthdays here,' said Maggie.

'Yes,' interrupted Jasmine; 'don't you love them also?'

'We don't make much fuss about them in our house,' said Maggie. 'There are presents, of course;

but mother generally gives us money, for she says it is less trouble. We are puzzled what to do with our money, and very often we chuck it away on all sorts of useless things.'

'But what a pity,' said Mr Primrose, 'when money is so badly needed by many people, and could do such a great deal of good!'

'I never thought of that,' said Maggie, her eyes opening very wide.

'But you will when your next birthday comes,' answered the old man, bending slightly towards her with an air of great courtesy. 'You will think of those words, "The poor ye have always with you," and spend your money accordingly.'

Maggie flushed and looked down. No one in all her life had spoken to her in that fashion before. It was not the words that impressed her so much; it was the sort of gentle, deferential, almost affectionate manner. She moved restlessly in her seat, helped herself to another roast potato, and said, as she attacked it with appetite:

'Mother's ideas and yours are not the least bit the same, Mr Primrose. She says that it is very wrong to give indiscriminate charity. There is the Charity Organisation Society, you know, which looks into all the cases now, and finds out the deserving ones. Mother subscribes to that; she says it is an immense saving of trouble.'

'I must not presume to differ from your mother, Miss Maggie,' said old Mr Primrose; 'but if I

must express my point of view, I think it is the amount of trouble which really makes the sweetness of the gift.'

As he spoke he pushed his chair back from the table.

'Now, girls, I will say grace, and you can go out and enjoy yourselves.—You will permit me, Miss Maggie, to give you an invitation. You have come here uninvited, but we are all delighted to see you. Will you, as you have come, form one of our party at five o'clock, when this dear girl'—he touched Violet on her slight shoulder—'enjoys herself, and we do her what little honour lies in our power?'

'Oh yes, come, Maggie,' said Jasmine, 'and I will tell you all about it.'

The four girls disappeared into the garden. Mr Primrose looked after them sadly. There was a thought at the back of his head which evidently troubled him a good deal. He was so perplexed that he went after a time into his study, shut the door, opened a certain drawer, took out a bundle of faded letters, and read one or two. The letters evidently pained him. He sighed as he returned them to their place.

'What am I to do?' he said. 'The children, at least, are all innocent, and it is an old, old story now. My children and her children live, mine on the hill-top and hers on the plain, as they must. I cannot prevent it; but there is

her point of view, and I don't wish for rebuffs. My darling wife—it would be cruel to her memory to allow her children to be treated except as they deserve. They are the truest ladies in the world. I have, notwithstanding our poverty, brought them up like that. They must not feel the sneers of the world, the most bitter thing in existence.'

The old man thought a little longer; then he knelt down and prayed. Then he went out and took a walk alone on the hills. What his thoughts were it is impossible to say.

Meanwhile, the four girls seated themselves happily outside the cottage. Maggie was the life of the party. She said all kinds of funny things, and then invited her three new friends to come and inspect Sambo. Sambo was fed and petted to his heart's content. He ate lumps of sugar, and devoured juicy, tender carrots, and finally allowed each of the Primrose girls to take a short ride on his back. But the time was going on, and Maggie, who looked several times at Violet, now pulled Jasmine's arm, and whispered to her that she wanted to say a word to her in private.

'Very well,' said Jasmine; 'we can walk up and down on that little flat ridge over there. Don't you see it? It cuts across the crest of the hill and hardly goes down at all. We call it our flat walk. What a wonderfully calm day it is! There is not even a breath of wind up here.'

'It is a wonderfully wholesome place,' said Maggie. 'I don't know when I was so hungry in all my life. I had the most scrumptious, golloptious, runcible dinner; and yet I am as keen as a hawk for your tea, which, by the way, will be ready now in about an hour. Aren't you excited, elf? There's a sort of mystery about your tea—your birthday tea—isn't there?'

'Oh yes,' said Jasmine, her eyes sparkling. 'We always have a little mystery on a birthday. This year it is something quite outside the presents; it is something that Daisy and I have done for Violet. She will be ever so pleased. We always give each other a real surprise on the birthday, and the surprise has nothing to do with the presents. It is more valuable than a present, all the same.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that the effect goes on longer. I suppose you will stay for the surprise, Maggie, or will it make you too late home?'

'Too late?' said Maggie. 'Not a bit of it. I can ride down the hill in no time.'

'Well,' said Jasmine, 'father did certainly ask you to the birthday tea, so I don't see how you can be out of the surprise. You will think it very homely, perhaps, but it is most important for Violet.'

'You interest me very much,' said Maggie. 'It

is wonderful how your simple sort of tastes arouse my curiosity. I am never excited—never—down at Castle Mary, or in London, or in Switzerland, or on the Riviera. I am always bored—we are all bored; we spend our entire time in boredom; and I tell you what it is, elf—it isn't a bit nice. Mother is always saving herself trouble, and we have picked up the same sort of notions. Oh dear, oh dear, I often yawn from the time I get up to the time I go to bed! No wonder you, living up here, feel fresh and jolly.'

'I don't understand you a bit,' said Jasmine. 'There must be such a tremendous lot of interest in the big, big world. I should like to see it for myself,' she continued very earnestly. 'I should like to find out if it would bore me.'

'I wonder if it would,' said Maggie, looking at her with a sudden expression of intense desire in her face. 'If you were with me, Jasmine,' she continued, 'perhaps I should never be bored.'

'Oh, you can't tell that,' said Jasmine, although her heart beat at the thought. 'I might find the air of the plain just as wearying as you do. I am not accustomed to it; I have never lived on the plain, so I cannot tell.'

'How funnily you speak!' said Maggie. 'You seem to think that there is one mountain where you are, and one plain where I am. You have narrow views, let me tell you, elf. Why, there

are mountains all over the world. In the hot weather we often go to places high, very high up in Switzerland; and I am just as bored there, and so is Laura, and so is Juliet; and as to mother, she complains more there than anywhere that she has not time for things and can't be bored. Oh, it has nothing to do with mountain or plain—the fact of being bored.'

'Then I don't even pretend to understand,' said Jasmine, and she turned away from her companion with the first feeling of impatience which Maggie had inspired. Maggie looked at her almost wistfully.

'I was very nearly forgetting,' she said eagerly; 'how lucky that I remembered in time! You are going to give presents, aren't you?'

'Of course,' said Jasmine a little coldly. 'It is our queen's birthday; she must have our presents. It is doing her homage; that is the way father puts it.'

'And you have all your gifts?'

'Of course.'

'But I shall be present,' said Maggie; 'and I—I mean I want to give her something too.'

Jasmine laughed.

'You can't possibly give her anything,' she said.

'You mean that as I knew nothing about it I did not bring a present with me. But see here, Jasmine; might not I give her this? I should just love it.'

Here Maggie slipped her hand up to her throat, and unfastened from under her habit, where it lay concealed, a little diamond locket, which was suspended to a narrow and very fine gold chain.

'I have lots, and I should like her to have it. May I give it to her?'

Jasmine looked at the locket, and her eyes sparkled.

'What are those shiny things?' she said.

'You don't mean to tell me that you do not know diamonds when you see them?'

'Are these diamonds? I have never seen any; but I have heard of them of course. How they sparkle—brighter than glass!'

'Of course,' said Maggie; 'and they take all the lights, too. They reflect ever so many colours. Can't you see for yourself—rose and violet and gleams of yellow? I often look at them as though they fascinated me.'

'They belong to the gay world,' said Jasmine.

'Oh yes, of course; diamonds always do.'

'But they come out of the earth, don't they?' said Jasmine.

'Yes.'

'So they belonged to nature before they became part of the gay world?' said Jasmine.

'That is quite true. How quaintly you speak!'

Jasmine still continued to hold the locket in her hand, and now and again she glanced at the sparkling stones.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Maggie. 'Look up at me, elf; look up for a minute.'

Jasmine did. Her starry eyes were brighter than usual, and there was a flush of excitement on her cheeks.

'Your eyes are as bright as diamonds,' said Maggie. 'You have very pretty eyes, much prettier than any of ours. Were Juliet and Laura to see you they would go wild with jealousy.'

'Don't praise me like that, please,' said Jasmine; 'for I can't believe you—I really can't. It would be nice for Violet to have this, and it would be sweet of you to give it to her; only, somehow — somehow, it would spoil all the other presents.'

'What do you mean—what can you mean?'

'It would be so much grander, and then it would be given to her by a stranger.'

'It is hurtful and mean of you to speak of me as a stranger,' said Maggie. 'Oh! please—please, Jasmine, don't refuse my little gift for Violet, and don't put obstacles in the way; I should so love her to have it. She might think of me as a wonderful sort of fairy if she liked, who had come on her birthday to give her something right out of the gay world. It would be nice—would it not? You won't prevent me—will you?'

'Of course I can't prevent you,' said Jasmine. 'It is very good and generous of you. It is a

most wonderful thing. I can't say anything one way or the other. You must just give it to her yourself; you know best how.'

'Very well,' said Maggie. 'I will manage. Thank you so much. Now I am happy.'

She returned the locket to its place under her habit, and followed Jasmine into the house.

'You must come up to my room,' said Jasmine. 'I will give you a brush and comb to tidy your hair, and you shall have hot water. I am afraid I can't offer you any sort of dress; the rest of us will be wearing our flower-wreaths.'

'Flower-wreaths! Do you wear them?'

'Of course, we always wear wreaths of flowers on our birthday. It is part of the fun. We make them of natural flowers. There are some late violets—very, very late—growing under a mossy bank, which we have kept for our queen's own wreath; they will be replaced presently by her crown. I can't have anything like jasmine, for it is not out yet, so I am going to wear some very early roses; and as to Daisy, she, of course, is crowned with daisies of the field.'

'Then I will have a wreath too—why can't I?' said Maggie. 'It won't take you a minute to find some flowers for me. Oh, look at that red may growing outside of the window! I can have a wreath of that.'

'But Betty says that it is not lucky to bring may into the house,' said Jasmine.

'Lucky? What nonsense! I will bring it in,' said Maggie.

She opened the window, pushed her body half-out, reached to a great bough of may, broke it off, and laid it on the window-sill.

'Now,' she said in boisterous glee, 'I will make a wreath for myself, and it shall be the prettiest of all the wreaths.'

She was quite an adept at this sort of thing, and presently had twisted the red may round her dark hair.

'It keeps my elf-locks in place,' she said, 'and suits me very well. Let me look at myself. Where is your glass?'

'Here,' said Jasmine.

'That thing? Why, it's not a foot across or a foot long. How can I see myself in it?'

'It is the only looking-glass I possess,' said Jasmine. 'But I will be your glass, Maggie. Your wreath is all right; only—somehow—what we have never worn—the red may.'

'Then I will wear it for the first time in your house. We fill Castle Mary with it at this time of year; it looks lovely banked up in some of the windows, with the light shining through.'

'Father says that the red may wants the sunshine of the outside world,' said Jasmine. 'But it is time to go downstairs; the clock is striking five.'

The girls all met in the little narrow passage,

and as they congregated there they came face to face with Betty Prime, who was bringing in the birthday cake. Betty pushed past them somewhat rudely, knocking Maggie as she did so. Maggie, who was good-natured enough, but who had never been taught to show consideration to a servant, resented this, and the colour rushed into her cheeks and her eyes looked angry. Betty laid the cake on the table, and, turning round, met Maggie Massereene's eyes with a full stare.

'Whoever you be, miss,' she said, 'you've come to this place uninvited, and into this parlour you do not go with them flowers on your head. They ain't lucky, and I don't mean to have bad luck crossing the threshold when my Miss Violet is queen of the day. So off they goes, miss, or off you go instead; you can take your choice.'

'Oh, you had better please her, Maggie,' whispered Jasmine; 'and the flowers really don't look particularly well with your riding-habit.'

But Maggie was now in a real passion.

'You are a nasty, spiteful, rude old woman,' she said; 'and I will wear the wreath just to annoy you. As to not being invited, Mr Primrose has given me a special invitation; and here he is.'

'Sir,' said Maggie, going up to him, 'please, will you tell your old servant not to insult me?'

'I ain't doing nothing of the kind, sir,' said Betty, whose face was white with rage; 'but

when she, an interloper, wears them on her head' —here she pointed to the pretty pink may—'and dares to bring ill-luck across the threshold, it is time for me to interfere.'

'Oh, come, Betty,' said Mr Primrose in his most consolatory tone, 'you know perfectly well that there can be neither good nor bad luck connected with a special flower.—But perhaps, Miss Maggie,' he continued, 'you will be so gracious as to yield the point. Some people are superstitious, and can't help themselves.'

'To please you I would do anything,' said Maggie.

She put her hand to her head, took the offending wreath, and dashed it on to the gravel path outside, and then she entered the little parlour with the air of a tragedy queen.

CHAPTER III.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

THE birthday tea was a grand success. It was impossible to feel long in the dumps when every one else was in such radiant spirits. Maggie soon forgot her grievance and Betty's rudeness as she listened to Mr Primrose's pleasant words and to the other girls' light chatter.

The birthday cake was so excellent that Maggie declared that never, never at Castle Mary was anything so delicious produced.

'That cake,' she said, 'would even cure boredom. Oh, I do wish I might have a little bit of it to take away with me! I could eat it in the middle of the night, and fancy myself back again with you all. May I have a tiny piece, just for fun?'

'Of course you may,' said Violet; 'it is my cake, and I will put some of it up for you in a little box before you go.'

'It is now time for the surprise,' said Mr Primrose.

Violet looked up eagerly. The two younger girls smiled and nodded one to the other. Mr

Primrose looked full of mystery. As to Maggie, she could hardly contain herself.

'I think,' said Mr Primrose, speaking in his gentle voice, 'that our queen had better have her surprise first and her little presents afterwards. But, my dear, allow me to remove the violet wreath, and to put your crown on your head.'

A very pretty crown, made of silver, was now put upon Violet's head. It was a sort of crown which belonged to the family, and which all the birthday people wore on each succeeding birthday. It was made of a kind of delicate filigree-work, and shone brightly.

'What a lovely crown!' said Maggie; and she felt more impressed and interested than ever.

Just then both Daisy and Jasmine rose from their seats and left the room. They were gone only a very few minutes, and when they returned, the objectionable face of old Betty was seen peering round the door. The girls carried a parcel in their hands. They brought it up to Violet. It was a plain-looking parcel, tied with ordinary string.

'Make room, please, queen,' said Daisy, 'and behold what we, your servants, have done for your Majesty.'

The pretty queen smiled and coloured. Betty gave a grunt of deep approval, and came a step farther into the room.

'It is only fair to say,' began Daisy, 'that our

dear friend Betty helped us in the work, or we should not have been able to complete it so well for the benefit of your Majesty.'

'Hoots!' cried Betty from the door, 'leave me out of it, young ladies. What I do, I do for pure pleasure.'

'You all interest me very much,' said the queen; 'and may I please open the parcel and see what it contains?'

Maggie began to crane her neck; the others crowded round. What could be within such a flat parcel, and tied so plainly, and yet—oh, such a fuss, such an excitement about it? String was not allowed to be cut in that family, and Maggie felt absolutely on tenter-hooks as Violet, with deft fingers, untied the knots and rolled up the string.

'Give it to me to put away,' said Betty, coming forward and holding out her horny hand. Jasmine handed it to her. The brown paper itself was then unfolded, and there lay half-a-dozen pretty night-dresses carefully embroidered and beautifully made.

'What a fuss,' thought Maggie, 'and about stupid night-dresses!'

She sank back in her chair with a sigh of intense disappointment. But, lo and behold! what was going on? All the voices were talking at once; even Mr Primrose was joining in. Violet's face was so full of delight that tears rushed to her

eyes. One of the night-dresses was unfolded, in order that all its careful workmanship might be the better displayed; and then there followed hugs, and laughter, and kisses, and delight. Even Betty Prime came in for her share.

'Oh Betty, what a dear you are! How can I ever thank you?' said Violet.

Maggie began to wish herself out of the parlour. This really was silly, to make such a huge, ridiculous fuss about ordinary night-gear. Why, surely the very poorest people in the world had night-dresses to wear. This was just a present, and a tiresome one. What was the mystery about it? But just then Jasmine came up to her and began to explain.

'I must tell you what it means,' she said. 'We are all of us under a vow—a solemn vow—to Betty Prime to do, or to get done, so much fine sewing in the year. Betty arranges on New Year's Day what the work is to be; and she won't let us off doing it for any reason in the world. Do it we must, or we forfeit her goodwill. I can tell you, Maggie, it is not at all pleasant to live on the hill-top when Betty is in a bad humour. But there is a little clause which enables us to get our work done by a deputy, provided that deputy or those deputies are members of our own family. Now, Violet is the best worker among us, because she is the neatest and the eldest; but this year she means to try very hard

to pass an examination which father is coaching her for. She will have to go to London for the examination when it comes off; and as she does not greatly love reading, and prefers to be out in the open air, Daisy and I and Betty herself made up our surprise. We determined to do her portion of fine needlework for her—half-a-dozen night-dresses, which she badly wants. She need, therefore, do no fine needlework for the remainder of this year, and will have plenty of time to devote to her examination. Look how delighted she is! Isn't she a darling?'

'Yes—yes; but it is very queer,' said Maggie. 'Now, when are the real presents coming?'

'Now—this minute. Father is bringing them in himself on that little tray.'

Mr Primrose now appeared, bearing a small tray in his hand. This was laid down before Violet. It was full of small gifts, the sort that people who have very little money can bestow—a work-bag made of old-fashioned brocade and very neatly embroidered with Violet's initials, from Daisy; a long marker with blue ribbons, from Jasmine; a book from Mr Primrose; and a quaint cup and saucer of real rare old china from Betty.

'Poor things—very. I am so sorry for the queen,' thought Maggie. And now, in a state of great excitement, she stepped forward, unclasped the little chain, and brought the locket and chain up to the queen.

'Please take these from me, and wear them for my sake, beautiful Queen Violet,' she said.

Violet raised her pretty eyes and looked at the gift. She held out her hand to take it; but before doing so she hesitated, and looked at her father. Mr Primrose now came forward. He took the locket in his hand, examined it carefully, and also felt the narrow gold chain.

'Most kind of you,' he said; 'but not suitable, dear. You will forgive me for returning it. We thank you for your kind thought all the same.'

'Hoots, kind thought indeed!' said Betty; and she marched out of the room in high dudgeon.

A few minutes later it was really time for Maggie to go. To her surprise, Mr Primrose slipped on a light overcoat, and, taking up his stick and hat, proposed to accompany her.

'But I don't want anybody, really.'

'You must permit me, my dear. I could not allow you to go down that lonely mountain-path by yourself.'

'But I shall be on Sambo.'

'Oh, I really ought not to let you. I cannot allow you to go down alone, Miss Maggie. I will take you as far as the gates of the castle. Do not pity me; I shall enjoy the walk, I assure you.'

'You must let father go,' said Jasmine.—'And

oh, father, please,' she added, 'mayn't we all go as far as the beginning of the pine-wood? Do let us, please—please!'

'Certainly, my dear,' said Mr Primrose.

The girls all now scrambled upstairs to put on their hats, Maggie accompanying Jasmine. The moment they got into Jasmine's room, Maggie took off the little chain and diamond locket. Without Jasmine's seeing her, she slipped it into the top drawer of the little wooden chest of drawers which stood by the wall. Taking up a pencil and a morsel of paper, she wrote hastily: 'For you, from me. Don't refuse the little gift of a runcible girl who loves you.'

Jasmine had gone for a minute to speak to one of her sisters, and knew nothing of what had occurred. Maggie now, her heart light—for she had been much hurt by the refusal of her gift by Mr Primrose—began to skip about the room, and to exclaim with delight over the happy, wonderful day she had spent.

'It is just like a story-book,' she said; 'and you are just like children who have dropped from the skies, so very different from others. I must see you again, and soon—very soon.—As to you, Jasmine, you will always be my special friend, won't you?'

'I should love it,' said Jasmine. 'I will be your friend if I can.'

'But what is to prevent you? If I love you

and you love me, the deed is done. What more can you want or expect?'

Jasmine did not know. She felt, somehow, in her heart of hearts that there would be difficulties. But she could not guess their nature. She only knew by the ache within her breast that the happy day that had just gone by would never return. Maggie also was silent after she had made her last speech. She stood thoughtfully by the window; then she spoke in an abrupt tone, as though she, too, wanted to shake off unpleasant ideas.

'You must not forget the birthday cake—I mean the small piece you promised me,' said Maggie.

'No,' replied Jasmine. 'I will ask Violet for it before we go.'

'I never tasted such a delicious cake,' continued Maggie. 'Won't I tantalise Laura and Juliet when I tell them all about our day, our wonderful day?'

The girls went downstairs, and a minute later a happy body of people began to descend the hill in the direction of the plain. Jasmine bade her new friend good-bye, and returned to the cottage with her sisters. They chatted happily as they went up the hill, none of them suspecting that the parting of the ways even now was reached, and that the old, old happy life was gone for ever. Jasmine was the one who had tasted of the knowledge of evil; but even Jasmine was unaware of the fact at that moment.

As Mr Primrose walked down the hill by Maggie's side, he was pondering in his own mind what he could say to her. She attracted him; he admired and pitied her. As to Maggie herself, she felt only inclined for silence; so they passed out at the farther side of the pine-wood without having either of them uttered a word.

Then Maggie drew in her pony. 'Please, Mr Primrose,' she said, 'I cannot let you come any farther with me.'

'I must see you as far as your own gates, Miss Maggie,' was the response. 'As it is, I fear your mother must be very anxious.'

'Anxious!' cried Maggie. 'She won't miss me at all.'

'Not miss you! What do you mean?'

'Mother won't even notice my absence; she never does. I am often out for long hours by myself.'

'My dear child'——

'Oh, I have been so happy to-day!' continued Maggie, turning round and speaking impulsively. 'Your home, Mr Primrose, and your girls, are like what I never saw before—what I never even dreamt about. I have been happy. I hope—I do hope you will let me see a great deal more of the girls.'

'But that,' said Mr Primrose, speaking with great reluctance, and yet with equal firmness, 'is just what I want to ask you not to do. I want

you, my dear Miss Maggie, to make me a promise here and now not to see my little girls again—to leave them alone in the future.'

'What in the world do you mean?' asked Maggie.

'I mean what I say. I would rather you did not know my children. My reason is this: you live in one world, they in another. They will continue happy in their world until you introduce them to yours. Don't do them and me that unkindness, dear Miss Maggie. Leave them to their simple life; don't deprive them of it.'

'But I want to share their life with them. I, too, want to be simple, good; to have tastes other than worldly. Why should you think only of your own girls? Why should you not also think of me?'

'I must think first of my own children, and I am an old man and know what it means. You are very young, and cannot understand what I know only too well, that you, brought up so differently, would soon tire of our simple life. The charm would go; you would see the ugly side. Oh yes, there would be soon for you a very ugly side. You would want your comforts, your luxuries, the things that money can buy, back again. Leave us, Miss Maggie; go back to your own. I am sorry to say this, but I must.'

They had now reached the lodge gates; Maggie drew in her pony. Her face looked quite white.

She felt suddenly very tired and hurt—hurt to the depths of her being.

'You really mean that I am never'—— she began.

'Not exactly never,' was the answer, 'but not often. It may be the will of Providence that you must sometimes meet; but don't make friends with them, don't bring them into your life. I am glad, believe me, to know you myself; I am glad you have had this happy day. Don't be cross with me. I would not speak as I have done were the reason not grave, very grave, to me. God bless you! Good-night.'

The old man pressed the girl's hand; Maggie gave it unwillingly. He opened the lodge gates for her, and listened to her pony's footsteps as they faded away up the avenue.

'Now I have done a cruel thing,' he said to himself, 'and hurt a young life—a lonely life, too; but I could not help myself. I must nip all intimacy in the bud.'

CHAPTER IV.

RELATING THE ADVENTURE.

AS Maggie Massereene rode her pony up the long and shady avenue which led to Castle Mary, she was lost in the deepest and most perplexing thoughts which had yet visited her young mind. Maggie was quite different from the rest of her family. She was a creature all moods and impulses; gayest of the gay on one occasion; morose, even melancholy, on another. She had glimpses in her soul of possible heights to which she might attain; but she scarcely knew that they were glimpses. She was only well aware of the fact that she was thoroughly dissatisfied; that what the others called fun, and good old times, and the joys of existence meant very little to her.

In her way she was the spoilt child—the spoilt child of fortune. She had apparently wanted for nothing since her birth. Born of rich parents, she was brought up in the lap of luxury. She had seen, for her tender years—for she was only fourteen—a great deal of the world. Her father was dead; her mother was complete mistress of the very beautiful estate and the extensive pro-

perty which her husband, who idolised her, had left absolutely in her own control.

Mrs Massereene could do what she liked with everything about the castle, which was built for her, and called Castle Mary after her name. She could will her great wealth quite away from her own children if she so chose. She was, on the whole, a good-natured woman, and not absolutely unworthy of the immense trust reposed in her; but being something of an autocrat by nature, her unique position made her still more so. She ruled all those with whom she came in contact, not unkindly, but nevertheless with an iron rod. To dispute her slightest will meant such discomfort to those who attempted it that, as a rule, people bent to the rod; they preferred it to feeling its power.

Maggie was the only member of the family who had ever even thought of resisting her mother — who dared to speak out plainly to her, who fought for her own liberty—sometimes with sorry results, but always with the clang of battle and with a certain sense of moral victory. Mrs Massereene could never tell whether she loved Maggie best or least of her family. Laura was demure, apparently gentle, apparently good as gold. Juliet was so pretty, it was impossible to do anything but admire her, and she had no horrid remiss, impossible ways; but Maggie — Maggie dared to be original.

Mrs Massereene did not call Maggie's quaint remarks and queer doings by this name. She spoke of her as a very obstinate and self-willed girl who needed to be kept in with firmness, and who must on no account whatever do what she liked in the world. The world was made to do Mrs Massereene's pleasure, not Maggie's.

Maggie continued to ride up the avenue; but as she approached that part which led on the one hand to the magnificent front entrance, with its wide gravel sweep, and on the other to the stables and the back premises, she let the reins fall on her pony's neck and became absorbed in thought. She had rather enjoyed fighting for small things with her mother, and had felt quite calmly and certainly that if she only persevered and managed well she would have her own way in the end. But now she had come face to face with quite a new obstacle. Her will was to see a great deal of the Primroses, and Mr Primrose had said, 'No, you must give them up. You must not visit the hill-top again. You must not be friends with my girls.'

'I made him no promise,' thought Maggie; 'no, not even in my mind.'

Then a smile woke the depths of her dark face, and, taking up the reins, she urged Sambo to a quickened pace. A quarter of an hour later she entered the house by one of the back entrances.

Castle Mary was a mansion which was conducted

with reckless extravagance. It possessed every modern contrivance for comfort and pleasure. There was electric light, made, of course, on the premises. The furniture was of the richest and most costly kind. There were servants innumerable; one knocked up against them almost at every turn. Mrs Massereene's creed was: Take the world easily, and get every possible thing that another person can do for you accomplished in that way. Don't do for yourself what another will do for you. Thus you husband your strength and enable yourself to enjoy life on all occasions.

There never, perhaps, was a more selfish woman in the world than Mrs Massereene; but nevertheless she quite posed as a good one, giving liberally to a Charity Organisation Society, which looked out the deserving cases, and saved her trouble. Her children knew her as she really was, and they did not greatly love her. She was not lovable in any sense of the word. It is true she had been the object of one man's passionate adoration; but this sometimes comes into the life of even very cold women. Mrs Massereene was one of the cold people of the world, although she believed herself to be quite the reverse.

When Maggie now entered the brightly lit hall she felt dazed for a minute. She was anxious not to meet either her mother or her sisters until she had got out of her riding-habit. She would then

get into one of her evening-frocks and come downstairs. She could slip into one of the drawing-rooms quite unnoticed, go into a back corner, and get absorbed in a book. There were always the nicest story-books to be found at Castle Mary, and Maggie was a voracious reader. Looking to right and left, she darted now towards the stairs, and had reached the second landing in safety, when she suddenly met her sister Laura.

Laura was older than Maggie. She was just sixteen. She was not out yet; but she put on, in Maggie's presence at least, the airs of a girl who was practically out of the schoolroom. Maggie hated her for these airs. The two sisters made a striking contrast now, as the one in the prettiest dress of the palest forget-me-not blue, and the other in her rough old riding-habit, confronted each other.

'Well,' said Laura; 'and what prank have you been after now?'

'Never mind,' said Maggie. 'Let me pass. I am tired; I want to get to my room.'

'All right,' said Laura, making way for her. 'You can go to your room and get out of these.' She pointed contemptuously to the riding-habit. 'But listen: if you don't tell all your adventures to Juliet and me to-night—every single one—I will tell mother in the morning. You may escape for the present if you make up your mind to be quite frank with Juliet and me.'

'But how do you know I have had adventures?' said Maggie.

'Know?' answered Laura, drawing herself up to her full height. 'Don't be a goose. Your eyes tell me; and that dusty, fusty habit tells its own tale. Go to your room now; put on something decent, and come down.'

'Then mums doesn't suspect?' said Maggie.

'Suspect?' said Laura. 'No; she has been lying down ever since we arrived. Kenway had to give her massage twice. She had a warm bath, and we were not allowed to make the slightest noise in her corridor. Mr and Mrs Fraser came by the afternoon train, and Lord Dunbar and Miss Andover and crowds more people will arrive to-morrow in time for lunch. Mums has to get herself in order; she is not thinking of you.'

'All right,' said Maggie, with a sigh. 'Go down, Laura. I will come presently.'

'Is it *pax?*' said Laura.

'Oh yes—yes! Now, do let me alone.'

Maggie ran to her room; she locked the door. She did not wish Mercy, the old nurse of the family, to come tormenting her; she preferred dressing herself. She did this expeditiously but very badly; she never could manage that thick, untidy hair of hers. She put on the very first dress she could find—an old gray muslin, which she had outgrown, and which had never suited her.

With her hair very rough, her face almost cross, and her dress all that was not desirable, she made her appearance in the drawing-room.

A very slender, gracious figure was standing on the hearth; there was a great wood-fire glowing in the wide chimney. The light from the burning logs made a sort of brightness over her figure. The lady who possessed it wore clinging, creamy lace. Her beautiful, rounded arms were bare from above the elbow. Her dress was also slightly open at the throat, showing the white column of her exquisite neck, her pearly ears, her dainty face. The lady was Maggie's mother, Mrs Massereene, who was forty years of age, but did not look a day over thirty.

Mrs Massereene was talking eagerly to a tall man with a stoop, and he was giving her the sort of lazy admiration which a much older man will bestow upon a remarkably pretty woman. Maggie glanced with a curious mixture of defiance and pleasure at the absorbed pair on the hearth-rug. She heartily wished that the great room was not so gaily lighted. She felt, as she entered it, that her dress was unsuitable. She had plenty of nice ones. Why had she selected the old gray muslin? As she crossed the wide lighted space she was terribly conscious of an expanse of leg not too prettily clothed, and awoke also to the fact that she was wearing her schoolroom shoes, which were both of them terribly down at the heel.

Nevertheless, even moments of torture come to an end. The people in the drawing-room were too interested in each other to pay any attention to plain Maggie Massereene, as she was usually called.

She found her beloved nook behind a screen in the back part of the room, took up a story-book —the very first she could put her hand on—and lost herself in its fascinating pages. She had read for three-quarters of an hour, when she awoke to the present-day world with a start. A gentleman had come and stood by her side. He spoke quite quietly.

'How do you do, Maggie? Haven't you even a word for an old friend?'

'Oh, Lord Dunbar,' said Maggie, 'please don't interrupt me! I am so fascinated by this story.'

'That is exceedingly rude,' was the answer. 'You must endeavour to devote a little time to me. Come now, look up.'

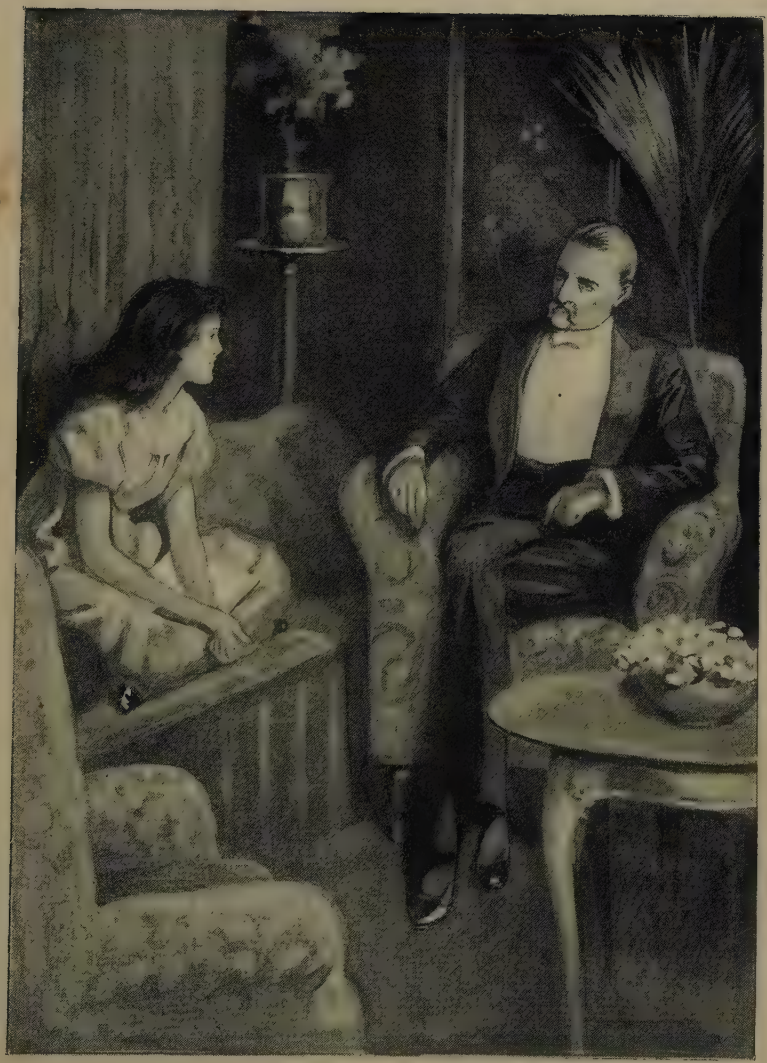
He sank into a chair, stretched his long legs, and looked at her lazily.

'Come,' he said, 'come; I want to see your eyes.'

She raised them.

'Brown as ever, Maggie,' he said; 'as much as ever the nut-brown maid.'

She laughed at the compliment; of such she received too few to despise them, and closed her book.



'Brown as ever, Maggie,' he said.

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'Never mind about my eyes, Lord Dunbar,' she said. 'Please tell me why you have come, and how long you are going to stay?'

He laughed.

'What a rude Maggie you are!' he said. 'I came because your mother was good enough to give me an invitation. I shall stay—oh, I can't tell you how long; perhaps until you turn me out.'

'Well, that will be never,' said Maggie in a cordial tone; 'so if you wait for that you will stay always.'

'Thank you, Margaret,' he replied.

'Why do you call me Margaret?'

'Because you spoke so nicely, you deserve the whole of your beautiful name.'

'You think "Margaret" beautiful?'

'Certainly I do. A gracious, kindly, queenly word Margaret. It has belonged to great women before now. I have a theory about names; I don't think any Margaret could do an out-and-out mean thing.'

'Oh—couldn't she just?' said Maggie. 'This Margaret could; she means to.'

'Now you must really explain yourself.'

Maggie fidgeted and reddened.

'Whenever you come to our house,' she said, 'whether we live here or in London or abroad, you always have the same effect on me: you make me tell you things whether I wish to or not. Now,

I am going to tell you—for I know you won't split on me'——

'Oh, come, Margaret; your language is not as choice as your name.'

'Never mind, never mind. I am so worried. I went to see some people to-day quite unknown to the others—jolly, jolly people—three girls like elves, and one man like a big, beautiful, and yet rather fierce brownie. He might have been anybody, and yet he might have been nobody.'

'Come, this is quite interesting,' said her friend. 'Tell me more.'

'I spent the day with them, unknown to anybody.'

'I missed you at tea, Maggie. Laura and Juliet were present, but I missed my friend.'

'But didn't you ask after me?'

The kind eyes of Lord Dunbar twinkled.

'Remembering the old Maggie, I thought it safer not,' he said.

'Thanks,' replied Maggie briefly. Then she continued: 'I was with them when you were having tea. There were wreaths of flowers, and—sort of fairy gifts, and six night-dresses, and—oh, a rejected diamond locket and a gold chain, and some trumperies.'

'Now you are absolutely too mysterious for words.'

'I don't mean to explain,' said Maggie, laughing. 'I was with elves in fairyland, and a great brownie

presided, and there was a wicked old hag—a sort of wicked fairy to most people—who nearly frightened me out of my wits. Ah, well, it was great fun—great fun; I never enjoyed myself more in my life.'

Lord Dunbar gazed earnestly at the girl.

'What is the matter with you now?' he said suddenly.

'Oh, I am so cross!' she said, making a violent and ungraceful movement of her body. 'Old Brownie would see me home—quite unnecessary; I thought him kind, although fussy; I didn't know what he meant. He is a malevolent old brownie, and brought me back on purpose. He says I am to see no more of the elves—tried to make me promise—wouldn't, of course—said a lot of nonsense: that they lived in one world and I in another. Stuff! rot! I call it. Parted from me as if he were conferring a favour. He doesn't know what Maggie Massereene is like when she is roused—that's about it. I am as cross as a bear with a sore head. I think I will say good-night to you now, and slip out of the room by this side door. Mother won't miss me.'

As Maggie uttered the last words she bent forward a trifle and gazed at her parent through a mist of ferns and tropical plants. She could just catch a glimpse of the graceful figure. She fancied she heard a silvery voice, and she was sure she heard once the melodious laugh; and then some

one else laughed, and Maggie turned to meet Lord Dunbar's eyes. They were kind, strange, quick-looking eyes, as though the man had lived through a queer world, and come out of it better than most people.

'Maggie,' he said in a very gentle and plain tone, 'you must cease to speak of your mysterious friends as "elves" and "brownies." You, of course, allude to some human beings when you speak of your day's adventures. Now, I can only try to fit the cap. There is one family in this neighbourhood which answers to your description.'

'I won't tell you—you can't possibly guess,' said Maggie.

But she looked interested, and a flush of colour, which made her pretty, instantly visited her cheeks.

'Did you not go up a mountainous path to find your fairies?' said Lord Dunbar. 'And are they not'——

'Oh, you are a wizard! you are a wonder!' said Maggie, throwing off her reserve on the instant. 'I might have known that there was no manner of use in keeping things from you. Yes—they are the hill-top girls; their names are after flowers.'

'I know; let me tell you their names,' said Lord Dunbar. 'Are they not called Violet, Daisy, and Jasmine?'

'Yes, yes, yes! Oh, isn't Jasmine sweet?'

'And their father is Mr Primrose, one of the greatest scholars in Warwickshire. Why, my dear, dear Maggie, you have found pearls of great price if you have discovered the Primroses. Mr Primrose is one of my oldest and most valued friends. I don't know his girls very well; but I am certain, being his, they must be worth knowing.'

'Oh yes—yes; more particularly Jasmine.'

'I congratulate you,' said Lord Dunbar.

'But where is the use? I am not to see them any more; that is what the old brownie—I mean Mr Primrose—said.'

'Well, I am going to see them to-morrow, and perhaps I shall have news for you in the evening. I don't promise anything; I never do make promises until I know. But keep up your courage. If you want a friend as regards the Primroses, you have found one in me.'

'You are delightful, delicious. I love you!' said Maggie.

'Don't love me too much until you know whether I am likely to do you any good.'

'You will tell me all about your visit to-morrow evening, won't you?'

'Yes. Now, go to bed, for you look fagged out.'

Maggie ran upstairs. When she reached her room she stood for some time without undressing. Mercy came and opened the door.

'Why, Miss Maggie, what have you been doing with yourself the livelong day?'

'Getting rid of the black dog on my back,' was Maggie's answer. 'Now, go to bed, Mercy; I don't want any one to help me to undress to-night.'

'Well, get to bed yourself, dear.'

'I can't. I must wait for Laura and Juliet.'

Old Mercy fidgeted about the room for a little. She had by no means the character of Betty Prime, but she was a good-natured, kindly, affectionate old body, and the girls, without fearing her, all loved her very much. Having tried to bring some order into the perfect chaos of a room, she departed, and Maggie seated herself to wait for her sisters on the foot of her bed. She was seated thus, Turkey fashion, lost in meditation, when the door was opened, and Laura and Juliet entered.

Juliet was a perfect contrast to the other two girls. She was small for her age, most exquisitely made, with the prettiest, neatest little figure that was ever bestowed upon so young a girl. She had quite a small waist, and exquisite little hands and tiny feet. Her eyes were like bits of blue china in her head. She had black, curling eyelashes, and exceedingly fair hair. Her hair resembled spun silk, it was so fine, and of a flaxen gold. It was not only lovely in colour, but she had quantities of it. It waved back from a low forehead and fell far below her waist. Her little ears were like pink shells; and a little rosebud mouth partly

concealed, partly revealed teeth white like pearls. Her little face was in perfect proportion and of most delicate outline. She never had a high colour, but at the same time was never destitute of a faint rose-blush on her cheeks. This little maid, who might have passed for a Dresden shepherdess or a little Watteau figure or some other quaint creature of long ago, had a voice as silvery as that of a real fairy; but, notwithstanding these manifold outward charms, she had a small, very cramped nature, a sense of entire satisfaction with herself, and no real interest in anybody else.

Laura was a graceful, handsome girl, neither very dark nor very fair. Maggie was dark and abrupt, and somewhat rough and apparently unfinished. Laura loved Maggie, but also rather despised her. Juliet despised her completely, and did not love her at all; but both girls looked, and listened to her adventures. And now Juliet sat down sedately, and said:

'Begin, Maggie; I am very sleepy, so don't keep us waiting long.'

'I wish you wouldn't worrit me,' said Maggie.

'Worrit! There's no such word,' said Laura. 'You'll really be a disgrace to us all, Maggie, if you can't talk the king's English.'

'I don't care whether I am a disgrace or a blessing to you,' said Maggie; 'but all I can say is this: I was in marvellous luck to-day. Neither of you suits me at all well. You, Laura,

are better than Juliet. Juliet's nothing but a little china figure with a pig inside it. You have a tiny bit more soul than Juliet; but neither of you has anything in common with me. I am a rough un, I know, but I'm a true un at that. I want—oh—things neither of you can understand; and I found the things to-day, and I mean —I mean to keep them.'

'What things, dear?' said Juliet.

She was not at all offended at being called a china figure with a pig inside. If she had one all-consuming characteristic, it was curiosity. She would do anything in the wide world to get her curiosity appeased.

'What—what have you found?' she continued.

'Three fairies,' said Maggie. 'Oh, don't exclaim, Laura.'

'We are too tired to listen to your nonsense. If you don't tell us both what you have been doing since we arrived this morning until late this evening, I will go straight to mother. I will see her after breakfast, when she is in bed waiting for the masseuse, and I will open her eyes. She is very discontented with you, I can tell you, and I heard her talking to Lord Dunbar to-night about sending you to school. I heard her say quite distinctly, "I would not part with Laura or dear little Juliet for all the world; but Maggie is different." Then Lord Dunbar said, "Yes, quite different." And mother said, "I am so glad you

agree with me. Maggie is a terrible trial, and I know school will be the only place for her."'

Maggie's face had turned white when Laura was speaking. A queer kind of lump came into her throat. Her first impulse was to say, 'I would far rather be at school than with any of you—you horrid things!' Oh, why did her graceful, her exceedingly graceful in some ways—oh yes—lovable mother (for Maggie could have loved her had she been allowed) talk of her like that? 'And I am better, not worse, than the others,' she said to herself. 'I would not be like those poor things, with their so-called beauty, for all the wide world.'

But the wild thoughts that rose to her lips were arrested by another thought. If she went to school there would be no chance of her seeing the hill-top girls again. Of course, Laura could get her packed off at once if she chose, for Laura had a certain power over her mother. Maggie knew this.

'Listen,' she said eagerly. 'Of course you won't either of you tell. There are depths of meannesses to which even you two could not sink. I will cease to talk riddles; I will talk plainly. Well, this is what I did. I was in a fever to get away from all the smallnesses, the remarks: "Oh dear, I wonder if all the packages are safe." "Has anybody reckoned my number of trunks?" "Will Thomas bring the brougham or the barouche?" And then the little pin-pricks of: "Oh, I am cold!

Oh, my back aches!" "Oh, how nice the fresh air is!" and so on, and so on. I tell you, girls, I was nearly mad. So off I rushed away from every one, and got on Sambo's back, and rode up that great hill which faces us. Half-way up I got into a wood of pine-trees, and in the middle of the wood, just where it was thickest, and I had completely lost myself, I came on a girl—a slim girl—all in white, leaning up against a tree. I talked a lot of nonsense to her, and she talked a lot of nonsense to me. She turned out to be Jasmine Primrose—a jolly, jolly girl. She told me that they lived in a cottage on the tip-top of the hill, and she took me up to it. Oh, my word! how she could climb such a path, and how Sambo managed to scramble after her, is more than I can understand.

'We got to the top at last, and there were two other elves—I mean girls. Their names were Violet and Daisy; and, lo and behold! the eldest was having a birthday, and I joined in, and I had great fun—you can't think what it was like—the simplest place, and yet the jolliest. Their names are Primrose, and there's an old man, their father, and there's an awful old woman—a sort of nurse-cook. Neither of you could get to them; but I don't mind climbing. They are *my* girls—my hill-top girls; and I don't mean to give them up to anybody. I had dinner with them, and tea with them; oh—and here is a piece of the birthday cake of the eldest. If you will faithfully vow not

to let out my secret you shall have a morsel each to eat. Never did you taste cake like this; it is a sort of fairy cake.'

The girls promised. Maggie, generous enough when not goaded to be stingy, divided her large slice of cake into three equal pieces. They all ate, and afterwards went to bed refreshed.

CHAPTER V.

THREE SISTERS.

LAURA and Juliet Massereene were accustomed to a very orderly life. Notwithstanding the fact that they moved about a great deal, that they journeyed here and journeyed there, and took trips on their mother's lovely yacht, the *Sea Foam*, and knew most of the fashionable watering-places in Europe, nevertheless their own lives flowed smoothly and with regularity. They usually went to bed early, and rose in consequence early also. During their time at Castle Mary, where they lived as a rule without interruption from May to the middle of September, this orderliness became a more marked feature even than it was in the winter.

There was an English governess in the house of the name of Maud Simpson. She was a stylish-looking woman of about thirty-five years of age. She travelled with her young charges, and was to all appearance indispensable to them. Mrs Massereene thought a great deal of Miss Simpson, and deferred to her opinion without appearing to do so. Miss Maud Simpson was the sort of person who knew when her bread was well buttered. It was

her object to make herself essential to Mrs Massereene, and to do so she flattered in a very adroit manner. She was fond of praising Laura for her smartness and beauty, and of exclaiming in an enthusiastic manner over the charms of Juliet. Maggie, too, she praised, after a fashion. It was surely not her place, she soliloquised, to run her pupil down. But her praises were so artfully rendered that they did the girl more harm than good. Mrs Massereene always felt impatient after Miss Simpson had talked to her about her second daughter.

'She is *gauche*, my dear Mrs Massereene,' the governess would say; 'but there is no reason why she should not be quite splendid some day. As to her ever attaining to her sisters' charm and grace, that of course will be quite impossible. Nevertheless, there is much in Maggie. She has a big heart.'

Mrs Massereene always felt restless when Maggie's big heart was spoken of. Miss Simpson knew this, and harped on the theme continually.

On the morning after Maggie had made her confidence to the other girls, and had given each of them a part of Violet's birthday cake, Laura awoke, stretched herself luxuriously, looked round her orderly chamber, and seeing that Mercy had been in the room and had brought her accustomed cup of morning tea, and that her bath was waiting for her, rose at once, as a good girl should,

and proceeded to dress. Laura was always exquisitely neat in her person, and also expeditious in her movements. While she brushed her hair, standing before the long mirror, she was supposed to be reciting under her breath, in order to keep her thoughts from vanity, some of the best-known lines of Tennyson's *Princess*. 'Knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed.' Miss Simpson was very proud of this particular feature in her training. There was no time, she said to Mrs Massereene, for her pupils to indulge in idle thoughts; but had she been permitted to look into Laura's heart at that moment she might have changed her opinion. Laura knew there were lines with which she was supposed to fill her mind that morning, but she was not going to bother her head to think about them.

'"Knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed,"' she repeated lazily. Then she stopped, came close to the long mirror, and looked at her delicate features. Were her brows really growing darker, and her eyelashes more curling? Maggie had such good eyelashes, and such fine brows! And would it really be absolutely impossible to climb that mighty hill, and behold for herself the elves who dwelt there? Laura disliked trouble of any sort; but she was of an essentially jealous disposition, and the mere idea of Maggie's possessing three special friends who were removed from herself by an inaccessible height rankled in her mind

to the complete exclusion of Tennyson's celebrated lines.

'I shall find a way,' she said to herself. 'I, too, can ride Sambo. If Sambo went up the mountain-path with Maggie, he can do it equally well with me. It is true I shall quite hate being sunburnt, and having my hair tossed about by a high wind. Why, it must always blow hurricanes up there.'

She went to her window as this later thought came to her, and looked towards the hill. From her point of view, it certainly appeared inaccessible. She had not particularly long sight, and she could see no cottage on the little plateau which crowned its summit. She even for a minute felt inclined to believe that Maggie had made up the whole of that extraordinary story, and that there were no girls living in such an impossible place.

By-and-by her toilet came to an end, and she went down to the schoolroom. The girls were not allowed to breakfast with their mother or any of the visitors at present. Laura sat down at their breakfast-table, Juliet soon followed her example, and Miss Simpson dispensed tea and coffee.

'Coffee, please, this morning,' said Laura. Then she added, seizing her opportunity before Maggie's arrival, 'You know all this country very well indeed, don't you, Maud?'

She invariably called her governess 'Maud'

when Mrs Massereene was not present. Miss Simpson encouraged this. She wished to get as strong a hold as possible over the girls while she was with them. They would be exceedingly rich, great heiresses some day. There was no knowing. It was certainly well to keep in touch with the rich.

'What do you mean, Laura?' said Miss Simpson. 'I know this country? I suppose so, seeing that I have had the pleasure of spending three summers here with you and your dear mother and your sisters. But why do you ask, my love?—Juliet, hand the toast to your sister; and, Juliet, don't lounge or poke out your chin. Sit upright, my love; sit upright.'

'Oh Juliet,' said Laura, a little impatiently, 'do attend to what Miss Simpson says, and be a good girl.—I badly want to ask you a question, Maud, and I don't want Maggie to know.'

Miss Simpson was always attentive when Laura prefaced her ideas with this remark.

'Well,' she said, 'what is it? You are not kind to your sister, Laura; but what is it, my love?'

'You see that great hill nearly opposite to the house? Sometimes, when I look at it, I cannot imagine why father built the castle here, for surely that huge sort of mountain must shut away some of our sunshine.'

'Do you mean Turk's Cap?' said Miss Simpson. 'But it is such a beautiful object; your dear father

selected the site on purpose. You see, my dear, Turk's Cap shelters us from the winter gales.'

'But we never live here in the winter, so that doesn't matter,' said Juliet. — 'Oh Laura,' she added, 'I wonder what you have got in the back of your head now.'

'I will tell Miss Simpson what I have got in my head,' said Laura. 'I want to know if any people live on the top of that hill. They can't —can they, Miss Simpson?'

'Yes, I believe there are some folks who have made a residence there,' said Miss Simpson. 'I have never taken the trouble to inquire much about them, but I quite understand that they exist—an old man and some girls.'

'Oh, the—the elves!' burst from the irrepressible Juliet.

Just then footsteps were heard coming quickly along the passage.

'Hush!' said Laura. 'Juliet, don't utter another word on the subject.—Maud dear, I will tell you afterwards; but not an allusion to what we are talking about before Maggie.—Ah, here you come, Maggie, late as usual.'

'Bother!' said Maggie in a cross voice.

'Margaret, you must not speak like that,' said her governess. 'And how untidy you are, my dear! You really are a trial. Look at your sisters in their spotless prints and their neat little aprons, and their hair so shiny and pretty. You are like

a rough Shetland pony, Maggie. Go upstairs this moment and put yourself in order. If you really can't brush your hair, get Mercy to do so; and put on a clean frock and pinafore. Now, be quick. If you hurry very fast I won't give you a bad mark this time.'

'And I don't care twopence whether you do or not,' said Maggie. 'I wouldn't be like those two stuck-up things for all creation.'

'Margaret, do I hear aright? I shall have to complain to your mother.'

'Oh! don't do that,' said Maggie, who had been dreaming all night of the horrors of school. 'I will tidy myself, but I will never look like them.'

She banged out of the room, slamming the door after her. Laura and Juliet looked at each other. Miss Simpson sighed, and helped herself to a liberal portion of fried kidneys and mushrooms.

'Now, my dears,' she said, as the sound of Maggie's footsteps died away, 'you might tell me why you were interested in those "sort-of" ogres who live on the top of Turk's Cap.'

'Oh—oh, but we mustn't,' said Juliet.

'No, we mustn't indeed,' said Laura.

'My dear children, you know that telling me means simply telling no one at all. Have I ever, ever betrayed your little secrets? Should I be Maud to you—your darling Maud—if I did?'

'But we—we promised,' said Juliet, fidgeting and trying to cling to her poor little conscience.

'You promised, dears—you promised? Whom did you promise?'

'Maggie,' said Juliet.

'Oh, this is one of Maggie's scrapes.'

The governess thought for a minute.

'Well, now, listen,' she said. 'I am the last to wish you to betray confidence, although of course it would scarcely be betraying confidence to tell the one who has the charge—spiritual, intellectual, and moral—of dear Maggie anything which must help her to guide that fine but erratic nature. Still, I am the last to force things. I had a sort of idea of taking you both to the flower-show at Preston to-day. It will be a very gay affair, and you might wear your frocks from Paris. Oh, never mind, my loves; I am always thinking of you. I imagined, indeed, that I had your full confidence; but if you think it better not'——

'It isn't that. We should just love to tell you,' said Laura. 'But, you see, we—I mean she—was very particular indeed. She made us promise'——

'And you must not break your promise, not for worlds. But now, suppose I put on my considering-cap—pass me one of those eggs, Laura—supposing I put on my considering-cap, and, with it on, tell you. That would not be breaking your sister's confidence. You have merely to nod your heads when I am right, and to shake them when I am wrong.'

'Oh dear, how interesting this is!' said Juliet, her pretty face sparkling with eagerness.

'Well, now,' began the governess, 'Maggie was away all yesterday? You nod your heads.'

'Yes, that is so, as likely as not. She rode her pony; she loves going away by herself. You are clever, Maud,' burst from Juliet.

'And suppose—I only say suppose—she rode to the top of Turk's Cap, and found the family who live there? What more like Maggie? What more altogether possible?'

'You are right—you are right!' said Laura. 'We haven't told you; you guessed it yourself. You are too wonderful!'

'Knowing so much,' said the governess, 'I may as well know the rest. I know she went there; but what about her feelings? You can describe her *feelings*.'

'Oh, she was in raptures,' said Laura. 'There are three girls called after flowers.—There isn't a bit of harm in telling everything now, is there, Juliet?'

'Oh no,' said Juliet, calmly spreading some marmalade on a piece of toast, 'particularly as dear Maud never tells again.'

'Go on, my dear child,' said Miss Simpson.

'There are three girls called after flowers. I remember their names, for they are so pretty—Violet, Daisy, and Jasmine; and the surname is after a flower too—Primrose. Isn't it quaint?

Maggie is in delight with them all. They had a birthday, or at least one of them had, and no end of fun; and she brought back a great piece of birthday cake, really the nicest and richest I ever tasted; but the best fun of all is, she thinks she will keep these girls as her own special friends, and that we shall never, never see them, because she thinks she can climb to the top of Turk's Cap and we can't. Now, look here, Maud. We want to see them.—Don't we, Juliet?'

'We *will* see them,' said Juliet, with a little spiteful note in her voice.

'Can't we, Maud?' said Laura. 'It would be such fun; much better fun than going to the flower-show.'

'Oh, we couldn't possibly manage it to-day,' said Miss Simpson. 'The weather is fearfully hot for the time of year; and the idea of climbing up there! My dears, we should look like turkey-cocks when we appeared in the drawing-room to-night.'

'I never thought of that,' said Laura, who had a great objection to being sunburnt.

'We couldn't do it to-day, my loves; but I will bear your very natural wish in mind, and—and try to gratify it.—Ah, here you are, Maggie; you look quite presentable now. Sit down, dear, and hurry with your breakfast.'

Maggie flung herself into the nearest seat. Her whole appearance denoted extreme sulks and a

determination to make herself as disagreeable as she could. She was very quick at observing signs, and noticed that both her sisters looked excited. It took a great deal to excite Laura and Juliet; they were too *blasé* for ordinary things to have this effect on them. Maggie said to herself:

'They have been betraying confidences, spiteful little cats! I will soon find that out.'

The idea made her more cheerful than otherwise. She was in the mood to proclaim war to the knife. Accordingly, she sat more or less with her back to her two sisters, and ate largely, but without once exchanging a word with any one.

After breakfast the girls went out for a short walk, to assemble in the schoolroom at half-past nine. Here they went through their lessons with a certain amount of diligence. Maggie was very clever, but could not possibly imbibe the sort of learning bestowed upon her by Miss Simpson. She detested rules and forms, and wanted to be free to browse in the great field of knowledge and pick up that which her nature could assimilate. She was always restless and hard to manage on these hot days, thinking out her own thoughts, and her mind ever wandering from the subject of Miss Simpson's discourse. In consequence, she had bad marks, was given punishment lessons, and finally kept in during recess when the other two girls were allowed to go and have a delightful romp in one of the shrubberies close to the house.

How Maggie hated that hot and sunny school-room! Why did they have a south room to study in on the hot, hot summer days? It had not even a pretty view, for it looked right into the back-yard; and there was not even a tree to break the direct rays of the sun. The windows, too, of this unfortunate room were built rather high from the ground, and they at the present moment would have been better for a good cleaning. They were dull, thereby still further intercepting what little view and brightness there was. One of them was open, and the flies came in in quantities, worrying Maggie still more by alighting on her forehead and rambling over the pages of her exercise-book.

Suddenly the memory of yesterday and all that yesterday meant came over her. She dashed her exercise-book to the ground, bent her head down until it touched her desk, and burst into stormy crying. What a cruel man Mr Primrose was! If only he knew her life! Oh, why, why had he forbidden her to have anything more to do with his girls? *They* care to exchange their world for her own? How little, how very little they knew! How wide was the difference between them, and how incomparably greater their world was than the one where poor Maggie lived and suffered!

'The shams of it, and the restraints of it,' she sobbed; 'and this horrible room; and that Maud, whom I detest; and Laura and Juliet, who can't even keep their solemn words; and mother, who

will never be like a true mother in any sense. Oh, to compare all of them with little Jasmine, or even with rude old Betty! And oh, to compare this odious, stifling, rich—too rich—castle with the air and freshness of the hill-top!'

She sobbed and sobbed, and fiercer and fiercer grew the emotions within her.

In the midst of this outburst of pain entered Miss Simpson. She took in the matter at a glance—the exercise-book on the floor, the angry girl with her head buried on her desk, and her sobs, which she could not restrain, filling the air.

'What is it, Margaret? To what am I to ascribe this disgraceful behaviour?'

Maggie struggled to a sitting position. She took out her handkerchief and mopped her eyes.

'I am crying because I am miserable,' she said. 'I don't care who knows that I am utterly miserable. I can't bear this life. I can't bear learning from you. You don't teach me at all—you don't know how; you haven't the right method. How can you teach what you don't know?'

'Maggie, how *dare* you? And with my diplomas!'

'I don't care a fig if you have all the diplomas in the world. I don't even rightly know what diplomas are. But if they make one like you, I would rather not have them; and as to your knowing, I vow and declare you don't know anything. You think your prim little ideas mean learning. I tell you, I have heard some of mother's

guests talk now and then, and I have felt that I would give the whole world to go on drinking in knowledge like that. But you—why, your eyes are shut—you can't see.'

'You are a most insolent girl. I shall take you at once to your mother.'

'Do,' said Maggie. 'I don't care.'

'You had better know exactly what it means.'

'I shall when I go there. Come, I am quite willing; I want a change of some sort. I must and will have it! If by any words I can say I can induce mother to send you away, I shall be doing a real kindness to my sisters and myself. You have perhaps a few facts crammed into your brain, but as to knowing things in such a way that they make your mind bigger and broader—oh, you can't pretend to it. Take me to mother, and I will explain to her about you. You think you will open her eyes on account of me, but I will have my say too. Now, come along. Do you think, for instance, she would allow a governess to be with us whom we called by her Christian name? That shows the sort you are—always toadying for favour. You ought to teach us to respect you. You would if you really knew things. Now then, come along. Who's afraid? I am not.'

'Margaret!' said Miss Simpson.

It would certainly be delightful to send Margaret to school; but if by accomplishing this fact Miss

Simpson herself lost her present situation, with its unlimited foreign travel and its many advantages; if she lost her present high salary and her easy life, it would not be quite so agreeable to reflect that at least Maggie Massereene had met with her deserts. The girl was clever, and the governess felt—although she would not acknowledge it even to herself—a little bit afraid of her.

'Come, come,' she said, 'how you do jump to conclusions! And why ever are you so spiteful about poor me? What have I done to excite your ire? My dear Maggie, all I wish is for your welfare. I know quite well what will happen if you meet your mother looking as you do at present and talking in your present reckless fashion. Now, look here; shall I give you a bit of confidence?'

'I don't care—say what you wish.'

'Your mother is most anxious to send you, Margaret, to a good school somewhere in Yorkshire, I believe—an exceedingly strict, old-fashioned school—where you will be, as she expresses it, curbed. Your mother detests the modern school where girls are given so much unnecessary liberty. But there is a certain Mrs Howgate in Yorkshire, whose mother taught your mother long ago, and who has a select school for a few girls, where they are thoroughly trained in all those things which you, poor Maggie, lack. No liberties will be allowed at Howgate Manor; to curb and suppress form the essence of the teaching. Many undisciplined girls

like you have been sent there and restored to their friends reformed characters. I could mention, for instance, Lady Augusta Sedley and the Honourable Jane Pyke. You have met them, dear, have you not?'

Maggie had. She sank down limply into her chair. If to her prejudiced eyes there was a horror in this world, it was Lady Augusta Sedley —a colourless specimen of young ladyhood that she had met last winter at Wiesbaden. This young lady was about to marry a man double her own age, and seemed to all appearance afraid to say 'Bo' to a goose.

'A most charming young woman,' repeated Miss Simpson, 'educated for many years at Howgate Manor.'

'How do you know that mother would send me to that place?' she asked.

'How do I know?' repeated Miss Simpson. 'The subject has been mentioned by her—your dear mother herself. In fact, to tell you the truth, she is only waiting for a vacancy to occur—for nothing will induce Mrs Howgate to have more than twelve girls at a time. Your mother, however, heard last week that one of the young ladies is about to make her *début* in the great world after the summer term; and Mrs Howgate even further informed your mother that she would take you at once if necessary, as one more would not matter during the summer; then you would continue as

the twelfth girl afterwards. Your mother considers it a great chance for you, and I am really doing my utmost to dissuade her from parting me from any of my dear pupils.'

'Oh, I couldn't go there—I couldn't, really!' said poor Maggie, shuddering.

'Well then, dear, I strongly advise you not to be so anxious to see your parent at once.'

'I own there are some things I could not endure, if I were sent to Howgate Manor. I would get away on the road or run away after my arrival.'

'You could not, my dear; you would be as safe in that place as though you were in a lunatic asylum.'

Maggie covered her face with her trembling hands.

'What is it you want, Maud?' she said at last. 'I am sorry I spoke to you so rudely. What am I to do now?'

'Pick up your exercise-book and be cheerful; don't think so badly of your poor old governess. Your Maud would not hurt you—indeed she would not. But you on your part must be faithful to her. I have influence with your mother. Don't strive to weaken it, my love. I can persuade her to any action that I think right. If you don't go to Howgate Manor you may thank me for the reprieve, Maggie. But remember, and be careful that this doom—and I honestly believe it to be a very fearful doom—hangs over you until practi-

cally the end of the long vacation. So you had better be careful, dear.'

As Miss Simpson uttered the last words she looked with extreme meaning at Maggie, who, as she expressed it afterwards, felt exactly like an india-rubber ball when all the wind has been taken from it.

'What—what do you mean?' she said.

'I mean that I know about your escapade of yesterday.'

'Laura and Juliet have peached!'

'Not at all. I discovered it myself.'

'You could not.'

'I did; I know all about it. Now, don't repeat it; but if by any chance you want help to see your friends again, communicate with me, Margaret; confide altogether in me.'

'But,' said Maggie, flushing brightly, 'you don't mean to say that you would help me?'

'I make no promises; only I have sympathy, great sympathy, for you.'

'Oh—oh!' said poor Maggie, 'if I could only believe that.'

'But you must believe it; I am, and will be, your friend. You have been forbidden to go up again to the top of Turk's Cap, but have I ever been forbidden? Would it not be possible for me to take messages from you?'

'You could not climb up there,' said Maggie, with an incredulous expression on her face.

'What could I not do in the cause of friendship and for a dear little pupil?'

'If I believed that, I would quite love you,' said Maggie.

'Think it over, dear. Remember that you are bound, but I am not. And now—here come your sisters.—Laura, our dear Maggie means to turn over a new leaf.—Juliet, we will not have too many lessons on this hot day; just a few more, for the sake of appearance, and then a long, long, delightful half-holiday. Now, be quick, my children; get the English history. One of you shall read a chapter aloud. Why not Maggie? She reads so well, so very well, does Maggie.'

During the remainder of the morning Maggie read Macaulay's superb account of the siege of Londonderry aloud to her companions. She forgot herself and her manifold troubles as the narrative seized and absorbed her. Her young voice rose with enthusiasm, and her young cheeks glowed with pleasure, and she looked much as she had looked on the previous day when Jasmine Primrose lost her heart to her 'runcible' girl.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TALL VISITOR.

IF Maggie felt a strange and passionate desire to have some more intercourse with the elves who lived on the hill-top, the elves themselves, and in especial Jasmine, were equally desirous to be with her. When they said good-bye at the entrance of the wood, which looked so dark and mysterious and beautiful, they felt a kind of pain in each of their young hearts. They had never parted from a friend before. It is true, they knew a few people—good little Miss Mousie, as they called an old lady in the prosperous town of Preston, some miles away; the rector, Mr Brodrick; and a few professors who came now and again to see their father. But they had never until the present moment had any intercourse with a girl as young as themselves, and yet who was in all respects different from themselves; a girl who knew the world, who could talk of those towns and countries and seas and rivers which seemed, oh! so dull when merely seen on a map and talked of in the geography lessons.

The three girls were little better than hermits; and though their father had not the least idea of

continuing this life for them always, at the present moment the world was in very truth to them a closed book.

As they trotted home all three together, mounting the toilsome hill as though it were a piece of flat road, they talked of Maggie, and envied Maggie, and compared her life with theirs. When they got home they went all of them straight to bed, for that was the rule at the hill-top cottage.

Violet and Daisy slept soundly. It was Jasmine who lay awake. If her sisters were pleasurably excited and more disturbed than they cared to own by the entrance of this strange visitor into their lives, how deeply was she overwhelmed! The seeds of discontent had always been dormant within her nature; now they fructified and bore fruit, a copious crop, overwhelming her, and for the time, at least, annihilating her early training. What was right was now no longer quite right to Jasmine, and what was distinctly wrong seemed to her to be almost right. She could not sleep; she could only think of Maggie with her saucer-like brown eyes, Maggie with her voice so vibrant and interesting, Maggie with her knowledge, Maggie with her stories. She wanted her. Jasmine's heart ached for her. She would have gone all over the world to see her again. Of course she must see her again. She would ask her father on the morrow to invite Maggie back to the hill-top. She would ask him

to send a letter down by Thomas. The letter must be left at Castle Mary, and Jasmine could watch on the brow of the hill for the little figure of Maggie on Sambo riding nearer and nearer, up the hill, and through the pine-wood to the hill-top. How she would welcome her! How much more interest this second visit would have than the last one! Jasmine tossed from side to side in her little white bed.

A strong wind had got up, following, as it often did, the extreme calm of the day. It shook the cottage, seeming to take it as a wild beast would in its mouth and worry it. The little cottage was so built as to resist almost any storm that ever blew. The sound of the wind that night would have been terrifying to a child not mountain-bred like Jasmine; but she hardly noticed it, although the casement of her bedroom window rattled and her very bed itself seemed to rock with the gale.

Towards morning it moderated, and when this happened Jasmine slept. She awoke rather late, and got up quickly, resolving to dash through her toilet. She had much, very much to do. The birthday holiday would be followed by a work-day time, when lessons and gardening and needle-work and exercise would fill the hours. Time was never long on the hill-top, for time is never weary to exceedingly busy people.

It was when Jasmine had just completed her

toilet, and opened her top drawer and took out a clean handkerchief, that there she saw reposing on a little bit of snowy handkerchief the dazzling locket and the thin gold chain which had been given to Violet and rejected by Mr Primrose. Jasmine read the message. Her heart glowed with intense pleasure. She clasped the piece of paper and kissed it passionately. Then she took up the glittering, beautiful trinket and looked at it as though she could never gaze long enough. Maggie was really sweet. It was beautiful of her to give Jasmine this present. Of course Jasmine could not keep it; she knew that quite well. She had not been brought up on hill-top principles all her life for them completely to fail her now; but she might at least take possession of this beautiful bauble for the time being. Maggie wore it under her dress; Jasmine would do the same. Her fingers trembled as she fastened the little gold hasp and slipped the chain and locket well out of sight. Her heart beat now against her treasure. She, Jasmine Primrose, was rich beyond all words. She wore gold and diamonds; what more could any girl desire?

She had scarcely secured the locket round her neck before the door was opened and in came Violet.

'You are late, Jasmine,' she said; 'father is waiting to begin prayers.'

'Oh, I am coming,' said Jasmine.

She stuffed the clean handkerchief, which had

caused the discovery of locket and chain, into her pocket and hurried from the bedroom.

'Are you well, Jasmine?' said her sister. 'Your cheeks are so red.'

'I am absolutely quite well,' said Jasmine.

'Well then, come quickly; father cannot bear to be kept waiting.'

Mr Primrose always read prayers in the most devout and delightful way. He generally explained what he read, and on most occasions his daughters loved to listen to him. But to-day Jasmine found the words dull and her thoughts wandering. Once she put up her hand furtively to feel the locket. As she did so she trembled with delight. At breakfast the other two girls broached the subject of their visitor of the previous day. They were anxious to know what Mr Primrose thought of her. Did he think her pretty? Did not he like her very much? What did they talk about as he walked by her pony's side back to the gates of Castle Mary? Above all things, when would she come again? Had he asked her to come soon? And had she promised?

'How am I to answer all these innumerable questions?' said Mr Primrose, looking first at Violet as he spoke, and then at Jasmine. 'By the way, Jasmine, my dear, you have not asked me one question, and yet you were the first to discover Maggie Massereene and to bring her here.'

'The others have asked everything,' said Jas-

mine, 'but I—well, I will ask one question: when is she coming again? Is she coming to-day or to-morrow or—or—perhaps—Saturday? We do very little work on Saturday.'

'I am sorry to disappoint you, my dears,' said Mr Primrose. They all looked at him expectantly; Jasmine felt her heart begin to beat. 'I quite understand,' continued the good man, 'what your feelings are towards your late very attractive young visitor. I think her an exceedingly nice girl; in fact, I admire her very much; but there are reasons which I cannot confide to you at present—reasons connected with matters which you have nothing to do with—that make it undesirable for you to pursue your acquaintanceship with Maggie Massereene. I have, therefore, requested her not to come here again.'

'Father!' burst from Jasmine. 'Father, how cruel!'

'Hush, Jasmine—how dare you?' said Violet, looking at her sister with her gray eyes flashing.

'I don't care,' said Jasmine. She felt lifted out of herself for the moment. The pain of this announcement on the part of her father, coming on the top of all her hopes, reduced her to a state in which she scarcely knew herself. 'I don't care,' she continued; 'I will speak. We can't be shut up here for ever and ever. We have got to live our lives, and we can't live them on the top of a mountain. There must be many, many girls in

the world like Maggie Massereene; we must meet them when we go into the world. Why should we not meet her again? She is my friend, and I claim her as my friend. I will—I *will* see her and talk to her once again.'

Mr Primrose did not reply to Jasmine's outburst —at least not then—but rose from his seat.

'I cannot understand you, Jasmine,' he said after a pause. 'I will talk to you presently. Now, just go and get through your morning's work. When you are calm, my child, I will talk over this matter with you; but believe me in advance that your pain is my pain.'

The moment Mr Primrose left the room Jasmine jumped up, flung the window wide, and went out. She could not stand the comparatively close air of the little breakfast-room. She wanted to be out. The gale had abated, but the wind still blew freely. She rushed down the kitchen-garden, past the wicket-gate, and on to that path which led past the brow of the hill, down, down, down towards the woods. Mr Primrose, who was standing not far away, saw her as she ran swiftly. A curious spasm crossed his face. Then he stood very still, with folded arms, looking straight before him. What his real thoughts were no one could say. His lips were very firmly compressed, but his eyes were luminous. After some time he turned and went into the house.

At this hour every day he instructed his

daughters. He taught them Greek and Latin, and some of the nobler learning which comes from the lips of those who have thought and suffered. His girls were none of them geniuses; but they adored their father's teaching, and this time each day was the pleasantest of the whole.

Violet now sat calmly with her exercise-books in front of her, and Daisy had her curly head bent over a Greek poem which she was translating.

Mr Primrose shut the door, and took his accustomed seat.

'Come,' he said to Daisy, 'you will translate these lines. Now then, do them with spirit; let me listen.'

'But, father,' said Violet in a surprised tone, 'shall I not go and call Jasmine?'

'No,' said Mr Primrose; 'we will let Jasmine alone for the present.'

Lessons began. They were carried through with the usual care, but some of the usual spirit seemed lacking. There was no little Jasmine with the fire in her young voice to communicate that same fire to the others. At last the work came to an end. Mr Primrose stood up.

'I am going out, girls. Attend to your sewing; get your allotted task well done.'

'But mayn't we find Jasmine?'

'I am going myself to find her. Don't idle a moment. Things are all right, my loves—quite all

right. In finding our pain, my children, we find our true life. Now, hurry with your work. It is appointed to men to work in the daytime.'

He started off down the hill, pausing now and then to consider, then walking on the next moment more quickly. Just as he reached the entrance to the woods he came across Lord Dunbar, who was walking slowly in the direction of the cottage.

Lord Dunbar and Mr Primrose were friends of many years' standing.

'Ah, my dear good sir!' called the nobleman as he advanced and held out his hand; 'my chief inducement in making myself a guest of Mrs Massereene's was the chance of finding you in your aerie. Well, here I am. I want to discuss Jackson's book with you, and I have some proofs of my fresh translation of Æschylus to show you.'

'In showing me yours, you show me the best of all,' said Mr Primrose, giving the other man's hand a sudden clasp.

The two men faced each other thus in the entrance to the wood, then they turned and walked slowly up the hill towards the cottage, talking as they did so. A little girl saw them when they met, and watched them as they went away together. The little girl's heart was all on fire.

'Father has his friends,' she thought. 'How glad he was to see that tall man! The man

came from the plain; he must live, therefore, in the plain. It is ridiculous; it is monstrous! It is unjust! I will not—will not stand it!'

The little rebellious girl had been crying, and her eyes were quite red now from all the tears she had shed. In the pine-wood it was sheltered, and she sank down on a couch of pine-needles, and slipping the gold chain from her neck, gazed long at the diamond locket and the beautiful and delicate workmanship of the chain. How lovely the diamonds were, and how delightfully smooth and exquisite the chain! She thought of no money value in connection with this most precious possession. It was beautiful, and it was the gift of love—love new-born—love that had come to her on one summer day. But never again could she part with it; it must remain with her all the days of her life. She pressed the diamonds against her cheek, feeling glad when their roughened edges hurt her a little. Then she returned it to its hiding-place, and wondered how long she could keep it.

When she first found it she had meant to give it back to Maggie on the occasion of Maggie's next visit. She had meant to say the most affectionate words in all the world, but also to show her new friend quite firmly that what had been rejected for Violet could by no possibility be kept by her. Now, however, a mandate had gone forth. She was not to see Maggie again. How,

therefore, could she return the locket and chain? She dared not take it to Castle Mary, and she had certainly no one by whom to send it back to her heroine of heroines. It would comfort her to keep it. Of course she must never show it to anybody—that would be terrible; but she could always wear it—night and day it could surround her little person.

She had the luxury of a sleeping-room to herself; therefore her sisters would not discover it. She could not possibly talk of it. She would have a secret from Violet and Daisy in future—a secret from the two who knew all her thoughts. But never mind; that very secret would be precious to her, for it would be associated with Maggie. She made up her mind, for the present at least, to keep the locket; and having resolved, she became strangely comforted—the ache in her heart was less violent. She had something of Maggie's. Maggie would miss her trinket, and think of Jasmine as wearing it, just as Jasmine, whenever she touched the locket, would think of Maggie.

'But, oh dear!' thought Jasmine as she walked up the hill on her way back to the cottage, 'I should always, always think of her even without a locket to remind me.'

Jasmine was not ashamed of having deserted her post in the schoolroom that morning. She felt that her father would forgive her this. He

was asking a much greater thing of her; therefore this tiny act of rebellion would be overlooked.

She entered the house. Up till this time she had forgotten all about the tall stranger who had walked up the weary hill to see her father. She heard voices now in the front garden, however, and Violet came to her in some excitement.

'Where have you been?'

'In the wood.'

'Are you better?'

'Yes and no.'

Violet gave her a look of deep sympathy.

'You know what I wish and long for; you know how sorry I am,' said Violet.

'Yes, Vi; I know,' answered Jasmine. 'But don't talk about it, will you?'

'I will not.'

'Ask Daisy not to talk about it.'

'Daisy won't allude to the subject. Oh Jas, we both love you so very dearly!'

Jasmine did not respond with an equal assurance of love on her part. All her affection was given for the time being to the girl whom she had met, worshipped, and lost. But Violet seemed to understand her. She said now in her gentlest voice and in her most sympathetic manner:

'Go upstairs and get ready for dinner. You had better put on your white dress again; there is a person dining with us'——

'Oh yes,' said Jasmine; 'that tall man. I saw him walking through the wood.'

'Yes,' said Violet. 'Lord Dunbar.'

The title meant nothing at all to any of the sisters; even the meaning of principalities and powers could not reach them on the hill-top. Jasmine ran upstairs. She put on her white dress hastily, hoping that the neck of it was not so low as to reveal a gleam of the gold chain. It was not; the chain was completely hidden. She brushed out her curling dark hair, and ran downstairs just as Betty was putting the dinner on the table.

The food was extremely simple, being nothing more or less than the cold remains of what had been hot on the previous day; but the potatoes were well done, and the cabbage was—what young spring cabbage ought to be — perfectly cooked. There was a bottle of home-made pickles, and some fresh butter, and a great jug of milk; and Lord Dunbar felt, somehow, as he sat at that simple board, that he was fed on ambrosia and wild honey. He enjoyed his meal, and the company of his host and his host's pretty daughters, and talked as he knew how, and fascinated the girls so much that when dinner was over they all clung to him. He was seen presently walking in the garden with Daisy hanging on one arm and Jasmine on the other. They asked him eagerly to come again.

'One came yesterday who is never to return,' said Jasmine. 'Will you be like her?'

'No; I shall come again,' he answered, and he turned as he did so and gave the child who spoke a glance of keen penetration.

He was one of the noblest men who ever lived, and he had a great gift of reading character. He guessed at once that the little girl who had uttered that remark had suffered and was suffering. He knew then that she was Maggie Massereene's friend. Maggie was his friend.

'Your name is Jasmine?' he said.

'Yes,' said Jasmine.

'I have heard of you. I heard of you, Jasmine, last night.'

'Did you?' said Jasmine, beginning to tremble.

'Yes; last night.'

At this moment Daisy loosened her hold of Lord Dunbar's other arm. Violet was calling her.

'I am glad we are alone, Jasmine,' said Lord Dunbar, 'for I should like you to give me a message for Maggie.'

For answer, poor Jasmine suddenly burst into tears.

'Do you know why I am never to see her again?' she asked, when she could speak through her sobs.

'I know this much, that at present your father does not think it expedient. By-and-by, when

you are older, you will be at liberty to choose your own friends. Maggie will be at liberty to choose hers. At present it is your duty to submit to your father. It is the law of life that we have to submit to our greatest trials in the dark.'

'What do you mean?' said Jasmine.

'We don't know why they are sent to us; that is one of the great laws. We have to take things on trust; so you, for the present, must take this on trust. But I have a bit of consolation for you. I can see that you love your friend. I want now to assure you that your friend loves you. She is as anxious to see you again as you are to see her. If you are patient she will be patient. I should have been exceedingly glad to have such friends as you and your sisters for my dear, dear little friend of long standing, and had hoped to arrange this to-day. But it cannot be managed; not yet. Nor am I permitted to tell you why. I am allowed, however, to take a message from you to Maggie. You can give me whatever message you like best, and when I return again—which I shall do before I leave Castle Mary—I will bring you a return message from her. That must be all for the present. If you are worthy of your father you will submit, and turn your attention to strengthening your character, and to waiting at the gates of life until you pass through and see what life is for yourself.'

'I want to go now,' said Jasmine. 'I am tired, tired to death, of this hill-top! I want to see the world, and men and women, and girls like Maggie. I want to see them all, and know about them and understand them.'

'You will see them, and before long. Your father intends to spend next winter in London. He told me I might mention it to you. He and I are undertaking a great work, and he must be within reach of the British Museum. You will see many people there.'

'But not Maggie—why not Maggie?'

'Ah, I cannot tell you why. You and she may come again into each other's lives. That I cannot tell you; but if I were you I would not fret or hasten matters. Get ready for life when it faces you, as it will soon. You will never be the same again when you have tasted of the Tree of Knowledge.'

'You talk to me very mysteriously,' said Jasmine, 'but somehow you comfort me.'

'I am glad of that. I shall be relieved if you submit to your dear father without causing him sorrow. He has had much and very deep sorrow in his life. Hence his desire to live while you were all young the existence of a hermit; but now he feels that for your sakes he must face the world. There is nothing he would not do for his daughters. Surely you, on your parts, will do this little thing for him. Now, will you run

away and get your message ready, for I must be returning to the plain almost immediately?'

Jasmine did run away. She went up to her room. Here was an opportunity unsought for to return the locket and chain. She could fold them up and write a few words and give them back to their owner; and although she would part with them, she would find something in that parting which would more than make up to her for the loss. Whether she would in reality have been guided by the voice of her conscience in this matter no one can quite say; but, as a matter of fact, while she was still hesitating, Violet came under her window and called to her.

'Come at once—this minute—to see Lord Dunbar. Father is going to walk down to the plain with him, and they must start immediately in order that father shall get home by daylight. Come quick—quick, Jasmine!'

Jasmine put her hand to her neck. In a minute the clasp might be loosened, the precious possession thrust into a box, a few words written hurriedly, and the deed would be done. But Violet's voice from below was followed by the more insistent voice of Daisy, who boldly entered the room and asked what Jasmine was thinking of. Jasmine felt a fit of despair.

'I can't do it—and, oh, oh! I don't want to,' thought the child, and then she flew downstairs.

A minute or two later Lord Dunbar had taken

his leave. Jasmine had whispered a few broken words. He had nodded to her and looked into her eyes. He had promised faithfully in that nod and that look to give her message in all its fullness—her message, with her heart conveyed in its delivery. She turned away.

'I'd be almost quite happy now if I had given him the locket and chain,' she thought; 'and yet, oh! surely it cannot be wrong for me to keep it. I will never, never show it to any one. It will be my secret between her and myself.'

CHAPTER VII.

ALL 'S WELL.

MRS MASSEREENE fancied herself more or less an invalid. She had recourse to all the different expedients for promoting health which the modern lady resorts to. She had a special masseuse and her own particular nerve-doctor. She spent a good deal of time in bed, where she read light novels and chatted with her maid or with Miss Simpson. She expected Miss Simpson to visit her every day as soon as the girls' morning lessons were over. These were concluded at twelve o'clock. At one the governess and girls went downstairs to their dinner, which was the lunch of the older people.

Mrs Massereene seldom appeared at lunch, but generally came downstairs in time for her afternoon drive. On the special occasion when Maggie had disported herself in the manner described, and Miss Simpson had been able to win her round to what she considered a better frame of mind, Mrs Massereene lay, feeling very fretful, on her pillows.

The lady's bedroom was a perfect dream of beauty. Mrs Massereene was still a comparatively

young woman. She had married when little more than a child, and now that her three daughters were approaching early womanhood, she was still herself so frail and slender and young-looking that many people might have been pardoned for believing that she was the elder sister of the girls. Nothing pleased her so much as having this remark made about her; and Miss Simpson made use of it in various forms at all times and in every place.

Mrs Massereene was supposed to be a woman of great education; but she could swallow such a lot of barefaced flattery that one sometimes wondered where her mind really was. She affected, however, to prefer the society of learned men and women to the more fashionable world, and many people of real intelligence and much culture met at her London house and at her beautiful place in the country. She was an excellent listener, and more than one genius tried to reveal his soul to the pretty, slender, fair-haired woman, who was dressed always in the perfection of taste, and would look at him with apparently great intelligence out of her large, clear, blue eyes. Many a savant thought he had impressed Mrs Massereene with his marvellous new theory, when in reality she had not followed a word he had said. But hers was pre-eminently a sympathetic manner, and that did better for the savant than comprehension without it.

Mrs Massereene was decidedly cross when Miss Simpson appeared.

'How late you are!' she said. 'It is nearly a quarter-past twelve.'

'I have had a very busy morning, dear Mrs Massereene,' said the governess in her pleasantest voice; and one of Miss Simpson's charms was her voice. 'The girls were particularly eager with their work, and Maggie read to us Macaulay's famous account of the siege of Londonderry in such a masterly manner that really the time flew by on wings. But now, what can I do for you? Shall I take the pony-trap and drive to town the minute lunch is over to execute those commissions you spoke of yesterday?'

'No, thank you. I sent Tigress in this morning. Sit down, please, Miss Simpson; you fidget me when you stand between me and the light.'

'I am very sorry,' said Miss Simpson. 'How—oh, my dear Mrs Massereene, how particularly delicate and—and interesting you look this morning!'

'Do I?' said Mrs Massereene. 'I am sure I feel delicate, spent to the last degree—not an ounce of strength in me. That last masseuse sent down by Dr Herrick doesn't suit me at all; she has not the right sort of hand. I shall send her back. You might wire to him after lunch, Miss Simpson, and tell him that Davidson is returning by the next train, and I should be glad if he could send me a

masseuse with the proper hand early to-morrow. She might come to-night. There ought to be no difficulty; a course of treatment like mine should not be interrupted. You will see to this matter, won't you, Miss Simpson?'

'Of course,' said Miss Simpson; 'and I do so truly sympathise with you,' she added. 'It must be dreadful to be massaged by a wrong hand.'

'It is, my dear, terrible. The effect is absolutely irritating, the very reverse of what is expected. Make your telegram quite plain, like a dear girl. And now that that is settled, let us talk about the children. What cares a mother has on her shoulders, and in my state of health, too! Has Maggie got on her Shetland-pony airs? Maggie really is a handful. I am more and more disposed to get rid of her at present. The Howgate School seems a solution, doesn't it? It will make no difference to you, Miss Simpson. You would, of course, stay with me. You are quite a treasure, and I think of raising your salary. I will talk about this later on.'

'You owe me my last month's salary,' interrupted Miss Simpson, colouring highly, for she knew she was treading on dangerous ground; but she wanted the money, poor thing! very badly.

'Owe it to you? I don't think so,' said Mrs Massereene in a sharp tone. 'I always pride myself on paying to the day.'

'But indeed I wouldn't mention it'——

'Oh, don't get agitated. I will look into the matter when I get up. But to return to Maggie. Mrs Howgate will receive her. She might go next week; it will be a great relief. You have no fault to find with the others, have you?'

'None; they are perfect.'

'Ah, what music to a mother's ears!' said Mrs Massereene. 'Poor Maggie! What have I done to be afflicted with a child of that sort?'

'Pardon me,' said Miss Simpson, 'she is the finest of your children. She will be the most interesting, and also, I firmly believe, the most attractive by-and-by.'

'Miss Simpson, are you mad?'

'Ask Lord Dunbar what he thinks about her,' said Miss Simpson, urged to this speech by an intuition which often guided her aright.

'Lord Dunbar has a fancy for Maggie. It is quite extraordinary,' said Mrs Massereene; 'and he is an interesting and most clever man. He will talk to me about Maggie by the hour, and yet he always seems bored when I mention my dainty little Juliet and my graceful Laura.'

'He has intuition,' said Miss Simpson. 'Maggie is a splendid girl; let me keep her for a little longer, please. I will promise not to worry you.'

'You don't worry me; but how can I see that extraordinary child enter my drawing-room as she

did last night, fling her great body into a chair, and sprawl out her long limbs? Miss Simpson, this cannot be allowed. If you don't put Maggie through her paces, and get her to appear as one of my children should in society, I must make a change. You understand?'

Miss Simpson did.

'I promise you faithfully,' she said, 'that you shall never be afflicted in this way again.' She thought very carefully for a minute, and then said with deliberation:

'Maggie was out all day yesterday; that was why she was tired, and would not worry to get properly dressed.'

'Why was she out all day, Miss Simpson? Why did you allow her to go?'

'I was busy unpacking; I lost sight of her for a few minutes. I am indeed repentant and sorry.'

'Oh, don't speak of it; you cannot be everywhere, and you had only just come here after a long journey. No other girl would have been so unreasonable and thoughtless. Where did she go?'

'Ah! I wish I could tell you.'

'You wish you could tell me? You simply must tell me. I certainly will not allow my children to have secrets from me.'

'I have thought over that,' said Miss Simpson, 'and I have resolved to give you a confidence. I

know you will act in your usual motherly and magnanimous manner. No one was ever before, in my opinion, so possessed of the finest attributes of the mother-heart as you are.'

'You are the very greatest little flatterer,' said Mrs Massereene, and she smiled in that manner which she believed interesting. To say that she looked delicate and interesting was the highest praise to her; to add further that her mother-instincts were of the finest in existence raised her to the seventh heaven of bliss. 'You are a good girl,' she continued; 'but come, Miss Simpson, you must not flatter.'

'Flatter you I could not,' said Miss Simpson.

'Well, well! we'll suppose that you feel it, my dear girl. I only hope I shall live worthy of your high estimate of me.'

'I will tell you what occurred.'

Miss Simpson then told of Maggie's adventure of the previous day. She felt anxious as she unburdened herself of that secret of poor Maggie's, with which she had become acquainted by such cunning means. She did not know how Mrs Massereene would take it, or whether Maggie's worst fate would be decided on the spot. To her surprise and delight, however, as she proceeded in her narrative, Mrs Massereene looked more and more pleased. She nodded her head; she smiled; she asked interested questions.

'Why, of course,' she said, when at last the

governess ceased, 'Mr Primrose used to be a great friend of mine. How strange that, in the worry of my widowed existence, I should have forgotten him! My dear husband also appreciated him. Mr Primrose was older than I—a very handsome man—strikingly handsome, in fact. We saw a great, great deal of each other when I was very young and he was in the full prime of his manly beauty. I should like much to renew our acquaintanceship. His children must be nice girls; it would be impossible for them to be otherwise. We must cultivate their acquaintance, Miss Simpson; we must have them here. You shall write a note from me this very day to Mr Primrose, inviting the children to spend a day with my children. How many girls did you say?'

'Three; and I can tell you their names. They are called after flowers: Violet, Daisy, and Jasmine.'

'How just like John Primrose!' said Mrs Massereene, with a smile.

'Maggie has lost her heart to the girl who goes by the name of Jasmine.'

'Miss Simpson, my children and John Primrose's must become friends—great friends. Where the children come, the father will naturally follow. I should love to see him again. We used to be such friends. I tell you what, Miss Simpson. It is dangerous to write. You must go to see them.'

'But it is difficult to get to the top of that hill.'

'Oh, not for a healthy creature like you. You can easily manage it; or why not ride? You shall have a groom and one of the most sure-footed horses, and go to-morrow or the next day. You shall take my message in person, and bring the answer back in person. Letters are sometimes dangerous; there is nothing like a verbal message. Mr Primrose can come and fetch the children after they have spent a long and happy day here. What a treat it will be for them! Imagine the poor little things cooped up on that hill all these years! Really, it gives me the shivers. Now, my dear, you have done well, admirably; and I will talk myself to Maggie. Not a word to her until I, her mother, tell her what I have resolved. This will be a great inducement to her to be good. Instead of school, the society of Jasmine Primrose! Pretty name—very pretty. I dare say the child is pretty too. Her father's daughter must be good-looking; and I have heard that the mother, too, was not destitute of charm. Ah, here comes my lunch.—Lay it on that table, Michael, and send Tigress to me.'

Miss Simpson tripped away. She had done a good morning's work. She had trodden the path of danger; for if Mrs Massereene had taken her story about the hill-top in a different spirit, where might poor Maggie be now? But all was well.

Mrs Massereene approved of the acquaintanceship. Friendship might, therefore, ripen fast, and the elves of the hill-top might disport themselves if they willed at the castle.

During lunch, at which several visitors who were staying at the castle were present, Miss Simpson was too busy acting the part of hostess—and very charmingly acting it, too—to have time to attend to Maggie; but if bright looks and mysterious nods could mean anything, Maggie guessed that the governess was in a good humour. She herself was in a bad one. She always hated the solemn meal which formed their principal sustenance of the day. She hated the stuck-up visitors and the tiny morsels which she was expected to be satisfied with. She had the healthy appetite of a healthy child, and loathed having to 'mind her manners' on these occasions.

To-day she felt worse than usual. Restraint seemed more and more impossible. She thought of her happy meal at the hill-top not more than twenty-four hours ago. But just as lunch was drawing to a close one of the men-servants came and said something to Maggie in a low tone.

'You are to go to Mrs Massereene the moment you leave the table, miss,' he said.

No one else heard the message, but Maggie felt her heart beating with a sense of cruel dread. What was she to do? What did this mean? She glanced at Miss Simpson. Had Miss Simpson be-

trayed her? But no; the governess's face reflected the very essence of good humour. Had her mother sent for her really to say that she was to go to Howgate Manor? Maggie feared. It was quite possible for Miss Simpson to betray her. She had no faith in her, however hard she tried.

'Well,' thought Maggie, 'if mother insists on that, I will show her what I mean. I won't go—I *won't* go! I will run away first. I could even venture to go back again to the hill-top and throw myself on the mercy of Mr Primrose rather than go to that school. If mother means that, she will have more to manage in me than she has the least idea of.'

Maggie longed, however, to know what her fate was. She played with the last courses as they were brought to her, for her appetite failed, so great was her excitement. At the first possible moment she escaped from her sisters, governess, and friends, and marched off to her mother's room.

She entered it noisily. The windows were open, and before she could prevent it the door had banged behind her. Mrs Massereene had partaken of an excellent lunch, and was now lying on her sofa wrapped in a dream-like dressing-gown of cream lace and cashmere. Her wealth of golden hair had been brushed out by Tigress, and was spread over a pillow—a silken creation in pink.

Mrs Massereene raised her languid hands when Maggie made her noisy entry.

'My dear, do restrain yourself,' she said. The girl turned and faced her.

'What is it, mother? If you mean school—that school—I won't go.'

'How obstreperous you are,' said Mrs Massereene, 'and thoughtless; and how you do jump to a wrong conclusion! Sit down quietly, and tell me about your day yesterday. I want to hear all about it.'

'My day?' said Maggie, turning white with fear and then red with amazement. 'Mother, how did you know I had a day?'

'Miss Simpson told me. Never mind about that now. Don't blame her; I drew it from her. I am exceedingly glad. I wish you to cultivate the acquaintanceship of the Primroses.'

'Mother, you'——

'I wish it; do you hear? I want my girls to know Mr Primrose's girls. You are all to be great friends; do you understand? What is the name of the girl you took a special fancy to? Little Jasmine?'

'Mother, I don't, somehow, believe it.'

'Don't argue with me; I am not in the mood, nor have I the strength. I have undergone massage from the wrong hand, and it has told on me seriously. Now, my dear, listen and obey. Write to whichever child you like best in the family, and

send the letter by a messenger. Tell the child that your mother sends her love, and would like her and her sisters as soon as possible to come and spend a day at the castle. Now, go and do this. James shall take the letter. Miss Simpson is going to call in a couple of days; but you can write in a friendly way to the child yourself.'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

WHEN Maggie reached her own room preparatory to writing that letter which her mother commanded her not to lose an instant in doing, she was positively trembling all over. She had dreaded her mother. She had feared, beyond anything in the world, her mother's knowledge of her escapade of yesterday; but, lo and behold! Mrs Massereene knew, and was not angry but delighted. Mrs Massereene was not only delighted, but she insisted on the instant formation of that friendship which Maggie pined and hungered for.

'Dear mother,' thought the girl, 'how I have misjudged her! Well, at least in future I will love her, oh, so very dearly!'

The girl went to her writing-table, supplied herself with materials, and sat down to write her letter. Her head was still a little giddy, and her hand shook.

'DEAR JASMINE'—she wrote—'Please, mother is so delighted that we have met, and she wants us all to be friends! Mother invites you and your sisters to come here the very first day Mr Primrose can

spare you. She has bidden me write; this is her invitation. I am more glad than I have words to express. Please come, Jasmine, and soon.—Your affectionate friend, MAGGIE MASSEREENE.'

Half-an-hour later the precious note was despatched, James riding one of the ponies up the steep hill and through the pine-wood. Maggie skipped with glee. She ran out of her bedroom to encounter Laura and Juliet.

'Come here, girls, both of you!' she said. 'Something most wonderful has happened.'

'What?'

'I know quite well,' continued Maggie, 'that you two betrayed me this morning to Miss Simpson, and Miss Simpson betrayed me to mother. Oh! you may turn pale if you like, but you can't deny it, and Miss Simpson can't deny it either when I question her. But I am going to forgive you all, for I suppose you can't help having such very small natures. "All's well that ends well," say I, and the secret is one no longer.'

'You do talk in riddles,' said Laura in a cross voice; 'but there is no time to listen to you now. Juliet and I are going to Preston with Maud. You can come also if you like; but I don't suppose you will like.'

'Yes, I shall go,' said Maggie. 'I will wear my grandest clothes, and strut up and down with the best of you. I tell you, Maud did betray me.

She told mother—mother herself—all about yesterday. Think of it. Think what might have happened if mother had taken the matter in the wrong spirit. But she didn't. Dear, darling, pretty mother took it in the right spirit. She is as anxious as I am to make the elves our friends. She bade me write to Jasmine and invite her and her sisters here at once, and the letter has gone by James on Pigtail. Pigtail won't much care to go up that hill with his old lazy bones. Well, the letter has gone, and we are all to be friends with the elves, and it is no secret any longer, and I am the happiest girl in the world.'

'Well, get ready; get ready now,' said Laura. 'This is rather nice; I am pleased on the whole. It is desperately dull in the country; and even the most obsolete sort of people will be better than no one to speak to.'

Maggie turned away at this, and dashed into her bedroom. As Laura and Juliet were engaging the services of Mercy, she had to dress herself. She was able, therefore, to choose her own toilet. She certainly appeared, when it was effected, as a somewhat strange little object. She wore a very full skirt of vivid scarlet, and a little black velvet jacket open in front, but displaying a white shirt. On her head she perched a black velvet cap with a scarlet feather; and thus equipped, and looking quite dazzling and wonderfully handsome, she joined her sisters.

They were waiting in the hall downstairs, and one of the footmen had just sounded the gong to acquaint Miss Simpson with the fact that the carriage was at the door. Most of the visitors had gone on different expeditions for the afternoon; but one or two gentlemen were standing about, and they certainly singled out Maggie for special admiration. Her very thick brown hair fell about her neck and shoulders. It was of the curly, fuzzy order, and suited her well. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks were each of them adorned with a patch of crimson, caused by the excitement and delight of her mind. Laura, in the softest, coolest gray, with a little white hat and white feather, looked insignificant beside the gorgeous Maggie. Juliet, all in white, was *petite* and charming; but even she seemed to fade beside the vivid sun of Maggie's personality.

When Miss Simpson joined the group, her first sensation was one of horror at Maggie's appearance. She would have sent her up there and then to change her dress had not the open-eyed admiration of one of the gentlemen guests caused her to alter her mind. Maggie did look wonderfully handsome. Why disarrange things? People would look at the group if Maggie were with them; without her it is possible that the gray and white figures —for Miss Simpson was also in gray—might be overlooked.

'Get into the carriage, girls, and be quick,' she

said therefore, and bustled her charges down the steps.

When they were driving away, Miss Simpson and Laura facing the horses, and Maggie and Juliet facing them, Laura burst forth:

'Miss Simpson, I am surprised at you!'

'Oh, don't scold, please, Laura,' said the governess. 'When you scold it seems as though the very sun was shrouded. You are generally so good-natured, my love. But what is wrong now? What have I done?'

'What have you done, Maud? You have allowed Maggie to come with us looking like a figure of fun.'

'There was no time to get her to change,' said Miss Simpson. 'But, Maggie, my dear, why did you put on those clothes? They were only made for a fancy dance.'

'I like them,' said Maggie. 'I hate dull colours. Mercy was attending to Laura and Juliet, so I could please myself. This is what pleases me.' She touched her vivid scarlet frock. 'I am glad I am able to wear it.'

'Don't let us talk of dress any more,' said Miss Simpson, who felt that at any cost she must be virtuous. 'Let us enjoy ourselves while we may. How beautiful the day is, and'——

She looked at Maggie. She had not yet learned the result of Maggie's interview with her mother. She was aware of the fact, however, that Mrs

Massereene had sent for the girl. What was the result? Maggie looked happy—strangely happy.

'Are you going to grin like a Cheshire cat, Maggie, the whole long afternoon?' asked Laura.

'I did not know I was grinning,' said Maggie.

'Well, if you are not absolutely grinning, you are next door to it. You are looking straight at nothing, with an idiotic smile round your lips.'

Maggie tried to look grave, but the next instant her white teeth gleamed, and she made an irrelevant remark.

'Maggie is pleased,' said Juliet, 'because her secret is no secret any longer. We are to know the elves in the future. Mother has given her orders. Maggie forgives us, Maud; she forgives us for betraying her. She says "All 's well that ends well," and that we can't help our small natures.'

'I did not willingly betray you, Maggie,' said the governess. 'Nothing was farther from my thoughts; but your mother somehow drew the thing from me. I did what I did to save you from school.'

The other girls looked eagerly at Maggie.

'Just as we did what we did because dear Maud drew it from us. It is wonderful how secrets get out in that sort of fashion,' said Juliet, with a smile.

'Don't let us talk of how it got out,' said

Maggie; 'it has got out, and mother is delighted. She wants me to know Jasmine and the others. I have written a note by mother's orders. James has gone on Pigtail to take it. I must own that I am excited and—and pleased. I could not wear anything dull after that—could I? Scarlet is the colour of rejoicing; I had to wear it.'

Miss Simpson leaned back in the comfortable carriage, breathing an inward sigh of relief. Had anything ever turned out better? She now had a real hold on Maggie. She could bring forward on all occasions the fact that she had won for her such charming friends as the elves. The most remote conception of what might really happen—namely, that the friendship might not be desired on the part of the elves themselves—never once entered her comprehension. Did not, in Miss Simpson's opinion, the poor always seek the society of the rich? The elves were poor, or they would not live on the hill-top; they would, therefore, be delighted to have the freedom of the castle.

The flower-show at Preston was a very gay affair; and the little gray and white group, with that one scarlet bit of colour in their midst, were followed by many pairs of eyes.

'Those are the young Massereenes of Castle Mary,' people said one to the other.

One or two acquaintances came up to talk to them and to inquire for Mrs Massereene. Even Maggie enjoyed herself after a fashion, and laughed

and chattered, and looked gayer and brighter each moment.

When they returned home it was late. They went to the schoolroom to have tea, or rather that hybrid meal between tea and dinner which they enjoyed at that hour. Afterwards the three girls went to their rooms in order to dress to go downstairs, and Mercy attended to them. On this occasion she came first to Maggie.

'Why, miss,' she said in a tone of the deepest disapproval, 'why ever did you go out in these things?'

'Because I like them, Mercy,' said Maggie in a cool voice. 'You were not here to look after me, so I looked after myself.'

'You are a handful, Miss Maggie,' said the woman. 'Well, now, you don't wear these any more, so I'll take 'em right away. These are play-acting things, and not fit for a young lady of quality to be seen in.'

'Oh, bother!' said Maggie. 'I'll wear them when I like. Leave them alone, Mercy; don't on any account take them away.'

But Mercy, quiet and gentle as she seemed, had that sort of command over Maggie which one who had looked after the child from her very birth was likely to possess. She did not argue or fuss, but simply bundled up the clothes, laid them on a chair, and proceeded to put her charge into a frock of purest white and made of the very finest

Indian muslin. In this, with white shoes and stockings, the little girl looked calm, clothed, and in her right mind.

'Now then, miss, I must go to your sisters. You can come into Miss Laura's room in half-an-hour if you have a mind to.'

'But I haven't a mind, Mercy,' answered Maggie. 'Laura and I, although we are sisters, have nothing in common.'

'Oh, fie, miss! that is very wrong. Don't you know that true adage, "Blood is thicker than water"?'

'I know nothing about it,' said Maggie, tossing her mane, 'except that it sounds very ugly. Anyhow, I am not specially fond of Laura, even though Laura is my sister. Oh Mercy, please,' as a sudden thought came to her, 'isn't there a letter or message or anything for me? There ought to be by this time. Haven't you heard of a letter which ought to have been delivered to me — haven't you, Mercy?'

'I haven't heard of no letter,' said Mercy. 'Don't keep me now, Miss Maggie.'

'Oh, but at least,' said Maggie, 'you must have heard when you were downstairs in the servants' hall whether James had come back or not from the top of the hill—from Turk's Cap.'

'Come back?' said Mercy. 'Of course I heard he came back an hour ago, and Pigtail fell coming down and cut his knees badly. He never was

much of a beast, but he'll be worthless now. It's an awful place to send a Christian to, and James is as cross as two sticks.'

'But hasn't he—hasn't he a letter for me?'

'I don't know, miss; I didn't ask him.'

Mercy left the room, and Maggie went and stood by the window for a minute or two. There were certain rules which were supposed to guide her conduct, and which, as a rule, she obeyed, for it was really too much trouble to get into endless scrapes about nothing. One of these rules was that she was not to ring the bell for the servants. Mercy was her special attendant, and the school-room-maid was only summoned by Miss Simpson. Another rule was that under no pretext whatsoever was she to venture near the kitchen or the servants' quarter of the house. But Maggie Massereene was not thinking much of these rules now. She was only wondering how, and by what possible means, she could see James and get him to deliver up to her the note which, of course, he was still keeping on his person. James was a very stupid sort of man, and doubtless, in the annoyance of having injured poor Pigtail, he had forgotten all about the note which ought to be in Maggie's possession by this time.

She was glad she was dressed first. She would go round herself to the stables and interview James, and get Jasmine's letter from him. She did not wait to put anything over her neck and

shoulders. She ran down just as she was. There were several servants about, but no members of the family. The guests were in the dining-room, for dinner had begun. Maggie opened the side-door and ran down through the shrubbery; reached a postern door which opened into the vegetable garden; ran down a narrow path, tearing her muslin dress against a gooseberry-bush; and finally appeared in the yard by another opening which led from the garden.

The men were standing about laughing and talking. They were using lanterns, for night had come, and there was no moon in the sky. Maggie, in her white dress, with her heart beating hard, stole into the midst of the group. Dawson, the principal coachman, saw her, recognised her after a puzzled glance, and said in a shocked voice:

'What are you doing here, miss?'

'I want James,' said Maggie. 'Tell him to come to me at once.'

'James,' said Dawson, turning round and speaking in a stentorian voice, 'here is missie. Come along; she wants you.'

A minute later James appeared out of one of the horse-boxes, rubbing his hands on a cloth. He was very much afraid of 'the quality,' as he expressed himself, and of Miss Maggie in particular. He came up to her now almost tremblingly.

'Yes, miss?' he said.

'Where is my letter, James? Give it to me at once.'

James scratched his head and looked foolish.

'What letter, miss?' he asked.

'Oh! don't be a goose,' said Maggie. She was now really afraid of being discovered. She, one of the young ladies of the house, standing in the stable-yard surrounded by the different grooms and stablemen, was in a position which, if discovered, would get her into a serious scrape. School —Howgate Manor—might have to be the terrible punishment.

'I want the letter in reply to my letter which you must have got from one of the ladies of the hill-top this afternoon,' said Maggie.

James looked to right and to left. He twisted his hands; he dropped the cloth with which he had been cleaning, and then, feeling that truth was best, spoke.

'I ain't got it, miss. I'm wurry sorry—I am, truly; but when Pigtail fell and broke 'is knees, I thought for a minute as the 'oss was done for —I clean lost my wits—I did, truly, miss. The letter was guv' to me by a young miss, and I 'ad it in my 'and; and the young miss seemed as though she was crying; but I lost it—I did truly, miss. I am wurry sorry; it dropped from my 'and, and is somewhere now on the 'ill, and I'm that bitter sorry!'

'Somewhere now on the hill?' said Maggie. 'And what part of the hill?'

'Just this side of the pine-wood, miss, where it's so wurry steep. I was riding Pigtail as calm as you please, and thinking of nothing, when the 'oss lost 'is foot, and down 'e come with a crash, and me a-top of 'im. It's a wonder I warn't killed—it wor indeed. I s'pose the letter fell from my 'and; for I never give it a thought till I come 'ome, and then it were gone.'

'Something else is going while you are chattering. Go back to your work, and keep your head another time,' said Dawson in an angry voice.

The man retreated; the other men looked at each other.

'Now, boys,' said Dawson, 'not a word to anybody about missie coming out here to ask for a letter. No whisperings with the maids. No talking over it. Little miss wanted a letter, in course, and I won't have her bullied about it. As to Jim—he's not worth the wittles he eats—a man with no headpiece that ever I could discover.'

Meanwhile, Maggie stood breathless in the front avenue. She was having a strange thought; a wild impulse was taking possession of her. If she hurried, if she rushed away this very moment, she might reach the very place where Pigtail had fallen, and find her letter. If she waited until the morning the letter might be gone. But surely no one had passed that way so late in

the evening. She would go there and search for it. She made up her mind it would not do to return to the house. She must not run any risk of discovery.

Like a slender white ghost, the girl took a short cut across a field. This brought her to the avenue gates. Then she flitted along the wide country-road. The sky was brilliant, and, although there was no moon, the stars seemed to shed a very faint sort of glimmering light. She reached the spot where the ascent began, and climbed along rapidly, panting and struggling for breath. It seemed to her, however, that that climb would never come to an end. She was a strong girl, but unaccustomed to hill-climbing. Her forehead was wet with perspiration as she still struggled on.

At last, by the marks of the slippery turf, she felt certain that she had found the spot where poor Pigtail had come to grief. The grass was very wet with heavy dew, and her thin house-shoes were soaked through and through. But she had found the spot; soon the precious letter would be in her possession. The place was quite open; there were no trees or undergrowth of any sort near. She must find the letter soon. But, search as she would, she could not discover it. She spent a long time fearlessly feeling about, straining her eyes through the dim light to see the little, square, white envelope. But it was nowhere visible; and

at last, very sorrowfully, she was forced to retrace her steps to the castle.

On her way to the spot where she had hoped the letter might be found she had given no thought at all to what she had done, or to the possible consequences which might arise therefrom. But on her return journey she was painfully aware of the fact that the chances of not being discovered or missed were almost infinitesimal, and that were it known that she had run away all by herself in the darkness her fate would probably be sealed. Howgate Manor would stare her in the face. What was she to do? She ran and ran, hoping against hope that she might arrive in the house and reach her own room before the guests left the dinner-table.

At last she reached the avenue. Again she took that short cut across the fields. How wet they were!—for the dew was particularly heavy that night. She got into the house at last by the same entrance by which she had quitted it, and reached her room, as she thought, in safety.

She sat down on a chair, trembling all over. She must rest here for a few minutes to get back her breath. The house seemed quiet and empty. The other two girls were, of course, enjoying themselves in the drawing-room. Miss Simpson was with them. Maggie quite pictured to herself how her sisters were looking, both of them so prim and good and proper, immaculately neat and most beauti-

Again she took that short cut across the fields.

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fully dressed. An hour ago, or a little more than an hour ago, she, Maggie herself, had been their fit companion. How nice she had looked when Mercy left her in her simple frock, in all the fresh purity of her completely white costume! In white from head to foot she had been; and her hair was neat then, and her face a little pale, and her whole nature calm. She had had her pleasant time, and then she had been just quietly happy. But now—now!

Her hurried breathing became easier. She knew that time was short and intensely precious; she must get downstairs. Her first wild idea of pleading headache and going to bed could not be entertained. She must at any cost see Lord Dunbar, for he would bring her news of Jasmine Primrose.

She went to the long glass which reflected her entire little figure and looked at herself. There was an abundance of light in the room, and she could see herself distinctly. Alack and alas! she did look bad. Her hair was woefully untidy; there was a scratch on her cheek. She knew where she got that. She had stooped under a great bramble, wondering if the letter had been blown in that direction. The bramble had caught her hair and scratched her cheek. She was almost unconscious of it at the time. Now the wound bled slightly and left a disfiguring mark. She hastily washed the blood away, and was relieved to find that it was not so discernible. She did not observe the

tear in her dress, and forgot all about her sodden shoes and stockings.

Having tidied her hair, she went downstairs. She entered the drawing-room. Alas! the ladies were all present, but the gentlemen had not yet arrived. There was a group of ladies standing round the fire. How dreadful of her mother to have a fire at this time of the year! Maggie was so hot from her violent exercise that she felt for a moment as if she would faint. Mrs Massereene's high, sweet voice was heard as Maggie entered the room. Fortunately for her little daughter, she was standing with her back to the girl. Maggie stole into that inner room where she had hidden herself on the previous evening. She took up a book, and pretended to be absorbed in its pages. No one had missed her. What a relief! But any moment her mother might call her to come forward. Then she would remark on her scratch and on—oh! on the tear in her beautiful muslin dress.

Maggie had not discovered it herself until this moment, but now she gazed at it with horror. It was a zigzag tear, and very nearly across the front.

'Oh, I am hopeless!' thought the girl; 'just when I am out of one scrape I am into another. Am I the same human being who was so happy a few hours ago? If it is discovered that I went to the stable-yard, and then ran through the night up part of Turk's Cap, I am done for. But I

won't be beaten; I won't. What a goose—what a fool that horrid James is! How could he lose my precious, precious letter?'

Just then Maggie protruded her little toes.

'My white satin shoes!' she said to herself with a gasp. 'Why, they are ruined, and sopping wet. Oh dear! they will make marks on the carpet. I wish I had never come into the room. I would have changed them for black ones; I might have hidden them so that Mercy would never find them. But as it is, oh, what is to be done? If I even move I shall be discovered. It is awful to be here! I feel pinned to my seat; I dare not even think. If mother calls me, or sends a message to me, I am sure I shall faint!'

But the sweet, high voice went on talking, and there was no call for Maggie. Occasional peals of laughter sounded in the midst of the group, and then the most welcome noise—the men were coming into the room. Maggie felt, somehow, that she must be almost safe when the men arrived. They would be certain to talk to her mother and engross her attention; and if Lord Dunbar would only come to her she would get him to help her to leave the room unobserved. She was not at all afraid of Lord Dunbar. He was one of her truest and best friends.

The men entered the room in a long procession. They filed in in different directions. Lord Dunbar was called by her mother. He went across the

room and talked to Mrs Massereene. Mrs Massereene replied. She turned now, and looked across the room. She saw Maggie's dark head in the distance—Maggie's head bent over her book.

'How studious the child is!' she said. 'Some people tell me that she will be the handsomest of the three; but that I can scarcely believe.'

Lord Dunbar only smiled.

'What do you think?' asked the lady.

'I never give an opinion in advance,' he replied quietly.

'You have been at the hill-top to-day?' she continued eagerly. 'You have seen them all?'

'Yes; I have seen them all.'

He looked at her with great quietness.

'Do you know,' she said, speaking in an animated manner and the colour filling her pretty face, 'I never was so pleased in all my life as when I discovered that my dear old friend John Primrose was living practically within a stone's-throw of us. He was one of my earliest and best friends. His children and mine must be great friends. He and I will renew our old friendship. I cannot tell you how pleased I am.' Absolute silence on the part of Lord Dunbar. 'You are pleased too?' she said.

'I have seen them all,' he said evasively, 'and have a message for Maggie.'

'Maggie,' said Mrs Massereene—'where is Maggie? Yes, yes; of course, over there. Shall I call her

to you, or send some one to bring her to sit with us here, near the fire? Dear Maggie has done me a great service by accidentally discovering the Primroses. Now, you—you naughty man—would have gone to see the old Professor time and again, and never mentioned a word of it to me.'

'We are doing important work together,' said Lord Dunbar, 'and he and I are also exceedingly old friends. Don't trouble Maggie, please, Mrs Massereene; I will go and find her myself.'

'Very well,' she answered. She wondered vaguely why he was so reserved, and why he did not seem to respond to her raptures at the renewal of a very old friendship. 'He surely can never have heard of that little tiff we once had,' she thought. 'Such a trifle of a thing, too; no other man would have taken any notice. But that gentle, dear Professor—as he used to be called in those days—had a curious vein of obstinacy in him. Well, well! those times belong to the past. He must have forgotten the very existence of our misunderstanding long, long ere this. How glad he will be to see me once again! And we can talk over the past. He is quite the most charming—— Well, I could not have acted except as I did act. He has probably forgotten all about that long ere this.'

'Mrs Massereene, I have come with a special request,' said a florid lady now approaching. 'You *must* take a stall at the great Preston bazaar. It will take place in six weeks' time in the Town

Hall, and it is absolutely necessary that you should be present.'

Mrs Massereene's thoughts were easily turned from one idea to another. She discussed the coming bazaar with the florid Mrs Halifax; and Maggie, and even John Primrose, were forgotten for the time being.

Meanwhile Lord Dunbar found a seat close to the young girl's side. He drew it forward and dropped into it.

'Now, Maggie,' he said, 'to put you out of suspense.'

'What is it?' she said, opening her brown eyes with some fire.

She was no longer hot; she was cold. The reaction after her violent exercise had begun to set in. Her wet shoes and stockings were sending unhealthy chills through her young frame. Lord Dunbar was not an observant man. He knew when a girl looked nice and when it was a pleasure to watch her, and he also knew when she looked the reverse; but any mere details escaped him absolutely. He thought Maggie seemed tired, and he was sorry for her. He felt that she was missing a great chance in life, and that Jasmine also, to whom he had taken an immense fancy, was losing her chance. But John Primrose was obstinate. John Primrose had undoubtedly a will of his own. At present any intimacy between the families was past hoping for.

'What a nice girl Jasmine is!' he said. 'I saw her once ages ago, when she was a mere baby, but I had not seen her since.'

'Did you—did you talk to her about me?' asked Maggie.

'I did.'

'But,' said Maggie, 'do you know what has occurred since?'

'What, my dear child? How agitated you are!'

'Everything has changed since,' continued Maggie, talking in an eager, impulsive voice—'everything, everything! Mother wishes it.'

'Wishes what, my dear?'

'Our—our friendship; she desires it. Miss Simpson found out about what I did yesterday, and told mother; and mother was not angry; she—she was pleased; and she asked me to write a note—she would have insisted had I refused—a note to Jasmine, inviting her and the others to come here. I wrote it, of course—I was trembling with joy—and the note was sent by James. Stupid old James went with it on Pigtail. On the way back Pigtail fell, and James lost Jasmine's letter.'

'She must have written after I left,' said Lord Dunbar.

'Yes, yes, of course; but, anyhow, she wrote, and the letter was lost.'

'What a pity!' said Lord Dunbar. 'How did that happen?'

'Because James is such a donkey. The pony fell,

and he fell, and he lost what little head he possesses, and he let the letter go. I went to look for it.'

Maggie dropped her voice to an almost fearful whisper as she uttered the last words.

'You did what, Maggie?'

'I went to look for the letter; I ran off as fast as ever I could to the spot. I was running hard, almost for my life, while you were eating your fish and entrée and things. I got to the spot, but it was not there—anywhere—anywhere! I have come back without it.'

'You look very tired, Maggie.'

'I am a bit cold, but that is nothing. Tell me now what Jasmine said, and what her father said; please tell me now.'

'I have no good news for you; you must make up your mind for disappointment; you must show what stuff you are made of, and not falter or fail when the first trial comes to you. Your life has been pretty easy up to the present; now you have got something to overcome. If you have any stuff in you, you will overcome it. It is no good grumbling or moaning; it has got to be endured.'

'Why do you speak like that?' said the child.

'Because I want to harden you, Maggie. You are such a fine creature; I want you to struggle and to conquer.'

'Oh, oh!' said Maggie, 'you think I have had no trouble up to the present.'

'My dear child, listen to me. There is not a human being in this world who has not petty crosses. Ask the king on his throne; ask the poorest woman in East London. All alike have cares and disagreeables to get through. You, of course, Maggie dear, have had your share. You could tell me a little list of small grievances, counting them off on your fingers, could you not?'

'Oh yes, yes.'

'I know the sort,' continued Lord Dunbar, giving her a quizzical glance: 'incompatibility of temper —oh, that is so common in families—little rubs with Miss Simpson, little disagreeables with Laura and Juliet; that bugbear of the young—the firm conviction that you are misunderstood. My dear, these things come into every life; there is no getting away from them. I repeat that you have had no trouble worth speaking of up to the present, and that if you had not something to grapple with soon your character would deteriorate.'

'Once,' said Maggie in a low voice, with a shaking sound in her throat, 'I had a dog—a little, little Pomeranian. They took her away from me because I loved her so well. They said I spoiled her, and she would come into the drawing-room. I cried for a week after my dog went away. That was a trouble!'

'It was; but you see you have got over it—you conquered it after a bit.'

'Oh, not very well,' said Maggie. 'I am sore

on the subject still. It was mother who had my Creena sent away. I took a long, long time getting the soreness from my heart.'

'Well,' said Lord Dunbar, 'let us talk of the present now. You ought to have Jasmine as your friend. She cannot be your friend, and you cannot be her friend. I have something to tell you that will give you pleasure. She loves you quite as much as you love her. It is a great pain to her not to be able to see you. She must fight against that pain, as you also will have to fight. I can give you no reason for this decision on the part of her father, and I can offer no opinion either with regard to his conduct. The thing is his wish, and, as far as I can tell, it can no more be altered at the present time than the ancient laws of the Medes and Persians.'

'Is that quite the truth?' asked Maggie.

'Yes.'

She was silent for a full minute. Then she said, raising a very white face, and looking full at Lord Dunbar, 'When you heard these things, had Jasmine got my letter?'

'No, I am quite sure she had not.'

'Did you see James going up the hill as you came home?'

'Most probably I did; but I don't know James, and should not have specially noticed him.'

'Try and think, please. Did you see a man riding a pony?'

'I cannot recall the circumstance, Maggie. I may or may not have seen the individual you mention. To tell you the truth, my thoughts were much occupied. I was absorbed with you and Jasmine; you filled my horizon for the time being.'

Maggie made no reply to this. After a time she said:

'Then the case is not hopeless. When you were there mother's message had not been delivered. That will make an immense difference. I wish—oh, how I wish that I could get my letter!'

'There is no use, Maggie, in your buoying yourself up with false hopes. I am as nearly sure as I am of anything that even the fact that your mother does not object to your knowing the children at the hill-top will make little difference to Professor Primrose. He is a man of inflexible will, and when he lays down the law he keeps to it. It is his wish at present that you children should not meet each other. The fact that your mother thinks otherwise will not alter him.'

'Oh, I cannot, cannot believe you!' said Maggie earnestly. 'You can't know everything!'

'That is true,' said Lord Dunbar, with a faint smile. 'Of course, I may be wrong. Now, you really look so tired you ought to go to bed. I, on my part, will promise you one thing: I will get up with the dawn to-morrow morning and search for that letter. If it is there at all I shall find it, and it will be in your possession before

breakfast. The letter will bring you the final decision. After that, dear, you on your part will promise to be brave?'

'Don't ask me to-night, please, what I will or will not do. I am tired, and oh, so cold! Please, Lord Dunbar, you won't tell mother that I ran all the way to find the letter?'

'No, no, you poor little thing. When you make a confidence to me it is sacred.'

CHAPTER IX.

HIGH TEMPERATURE.

MAGGIE managed to get to her room without any one noticing her. She removed her sopping wet stockings and spoiled shoes, took off her draggled white muslin dress, and got into bed. She was lying now in dry sheets and with blankets over her; but the mischief was done. The cold shivering remained. She shook so violently that the very bed seemed to move under her. It was with great difficulty she could keep her teeth from chattering.

Many mingled emotions forced themselves through the poor child's mind during the really terrible night that followed. She had been excited and over-tired on the previous day, and now her mad escapade and her great imprudence in not changing her shoes and stockings had brought on illness sharp enough for the time being.

Her first wish, however, was that no one should discover her. She had escaped so far. She would, of course, be all right in the morning. Her head ached too badly for her to worry much about

her injured and torn frock and ruined white satin shoes. 'Sufficient unto the day,' she thought. She could not worry about them now.

Mercy came into the room after Maggie had been in bed for an hour. But the child had hidden her head under the bedclothes. The woman thought she was asleep, and softly and quietly withdrew. She shut the door without making any sound, and then turned to Laura, who was standing on the landing.

'Don't go into your sister's room, miss. She is fast asleep, and it would be a pity to waken her.'

Laura had passed a delightful evening. She had been petted and fussed over. Delicate compliments had been hers. They had fallen from many pairs of lips. She felt almost grown up, and the delights of the future were beginning to make themselves felt. In a year, or two years at most, she would be quite a society young lady. How lovely that would be! How quickly time would pass then! The heaven of heated rooms, and limitless dress, and night turned into day, and flattery morning, noon, and night—flattery which would lead to homage, to worship—all these would be her portion. She had no higher ideal. These would satisfy her meagre nature.

She went to the room which she shared with Juliet. Juliet was tired, and was getting rapidly into bed. Mercy did what was necessary for the

sisters, and left them. As Juliet sprang into her little, white bed she said:

'Oh, how cosy! I shall be asleep in a minute or two. Have you anything to talk about, Laura?'

'Lots and lots,' said Laura; 'but if you can't stay awake, why, you can't.'

'I can't really, Lau. I suppose you want to repeat to me all the silly things that tall Mr Grey was talking to you about. I saw you blushing. Oh, I say, Laura, you can make eyes! I was quite shocked.'

'I can't—you horrid girl! I only opened my eyes a little when Mr Grey praised them. He said they were such a beautiful colour.'

'Oh, they are not half as fine as Maggie's,' said Juliet. 'Maggie has got eyes if you like! But there—I can't talk; I am off to by-by land. Good-night, good'——

The last word was inaudible. Laura sat down on the edge of her bed. She felt very discontented. To have a triumph, and to have no one to retail it to, was worse than having no triumph at all. But stay—there was Maggie. Maggie, after all, was a much more interesting person to talk things over with than Juliet. She had seldom approved of what Laura told her, but at least she was spicy and animated. She could be sympathetic, too; Laura was certain of this. If there was anything really the matter, Maggie could be

quite sympathetic. Mr Grey had spoken in a marked way to-night, and he had looked at her so earnestly. It was wrong, of course, for she was not sixteen yet. But still, men could not help liking girls, even though they were not quite grown up. Maggie must know; it would be such a relief to Laura's mind. So, wrapping her white dressing-gown round her, with her long, thick hair hanging over her back and shoulders, Laura left her own room and went into that devoted to Maggie.

The moment she opened the door Maggie called out fiercely, 'I sha'n't give the letter up. It is at the other side of that bramble! I don't mind how my face is torn. I will—*I will* get the letter!'

Then she opened wild, bright eyes, and fixed them on her sister's face.

'Who are you? What is the matter?' she said.

'Why, Maggie—you goose!' said Laura. 'What on earth are you in such a state about? And your face is as red as a peony! I came in to have a chat with you. Whatever can be wrong?'

'Oh! I am so hot,' said Maggie; 'and my head aches like anything. Do leave me alone, Laura; I can't talk to you to-night.'

'Let me make you more comfortable,' said Laura; 'your bedclothes are in such a mess. And, oh dear, what a scratch you have got on

your cheek! How ever did you get it? Did that bramble really give it to you? You were calling out about a bramble when I came into the room.'

'A bramble?' said Maggie, full consciousness and repossession of her faculties returning to her. She must be careful; Laura was very spiteful and clever. If Laura knew what Maggie had really done that evening there would be an end of everything.

'I scratched myself,' she said, 'no matter how; but I have caught cold, I think. I feel rather queer.'

'You look queer,' said Laura. 'Shall I give you a drink of cold water? I am sure it would do you no end of good.'

'Please, I am so thirsty,' said Maggie.

Laura filled a glass full to the brim, and Maggie drank it off.

'Now sit up in bed for a bit,' said Laura; 'it will cool your face.'

'Is my face very red?' asked Maggie.

'Like a peony. There, you are shivering. How funny of you to be both hot and cold at the same time!'

'I am bitterly cold,' said Maggie. 'I can't sit up; I must lie down. Oh, do get some more things to put over me!'

Laura rummaged about the room. She found a rug and spread it over her sister.

'Now you are better?' she said.

'Yes, I am.'

'Maggie,' said Laura, 'why didn't you come into the drawing-room with Juliet and me this evening?'

'I—I had other things to attend to,' said Maggie.

She never told a lie if she could help it. Laura knew this, and watched her narrowly.

'You are up to something, Miss Maggie,' she said, after a minute's pause. 'I will find out to-morrow. I don't want to be bothered now; I have something to tell you on my own account. I came in here for the express purpose. Maggie, whatever sort of evening you may have enjoyed, I have had a very delightful time.'

'Oh,' said Maggie, 'it does make my head ache so badly when you *will* hold that candle right in front of my eyes.'

'How cross you are, and unsympathetic!' said Laura. 'Well, I will put it back on the table. There now, is that better?'

'Yes, thanks.' Maggie could scarcely speak, she was shivering so. 'I wish you would go away,' she said fretfully. 'I like the dark best, and yet I don't—I see things in the dark.'

'Oh, you are so fanciful!' said Laura. 'You must just turn on your side presently and go to sleep; but I must tell you first—it is Mr Grey, that distinguished-looking man; you must have noticed

him, he has such nice hazel eyes, and oh, *such* a charming voice! He was so attentive to me this evening; he really was, Maggie. It was quite, quite embarrassing.'

'What does attentive mean?' asked Maggie.

'Don't you know?'

'Don't know, nor care,' said Maggie. 'I am *so* cold.'

'Well, I will find something else to put over you in a minute. There is the key in the cupboard; I will go there.'

'Oh! please don't—don't; you must not go near the cupboard.'

Maggie remembered that her ruined muslin frock and her destroyed white slippers were there within view.

'Why not?' said Laura, intensely curious. 'I will go if I like.'

'You can't—you sha'n't! I am not cold now. Go on about your Mr Grey.'

The bait took.

'He is so charming!' said Laura. 'I quite think that he is'——

'Oh, does he mean to marry you?' said Maggie. 'Is that it?'

'Maggie, you really are quite coarse! Certainly not; but a man may show his devotion. I should like to tell you what he said. I wish I could explain to you exactly how he looked. It was his looks more than his speech.'

'I can't be bothered about looks,' said Maggie. 'Do—do go away, please—please!'

'I will when I have really told you. I never before saw you so truly unsympathetic; and you know, Maggie, notwithstanding that you are somewhat of a bear, and a rough Shetland pony, and a rough diamond, and all the rest, you can be very sympathetic when you like. I was saying so to Juliet just now. Juliet is a pig. Oh yes, of course, she is pretty, but I don't believe she has a scrap of feeling. That is why her face looks so smooth and uncareworn. Nothing affects her, provided she can get pretty enough clothes and dainty enough food. Juliet is a regular epicure. Self is her idol. She never, never thinks of others. She is asleep now, although she might have known—anybody with half an eye would have known—that I wanted to unburden. A girl cannot, cannot come to the threshold of a great mystery without wanting some one to talk it over to. I would not have disturbed you, Maggie, but for Juliet's strange behaviour. There she is in her bed now, little selfish one, snoring away as hard as possible. Juliet has a wonderfully shrill little snore, although her nose is so pretty; but now then, Maggie, what is it?'

'I am wondering,' said Maggie—'wondering when you will go, and take your candle with you; that is about all.'

'Then you don't want to hear my story?'

'Not in the very least. You have not a story; you are only talking rubbish.'

'Ah, am I?' said Laura. She forgot everything else in her disgust. 'You shall hear, whether you like it or not. You are older than Juliet, and although you are so plain that you are never likely to have lovers on your own account, yet still you must have more comprehension on the subject; you are nearer the threshold of the beautiful thing than Juliet. If you don't mind your manners, and if your looks don't improve, you are likely to stand on the threshold and never to go inside. Maggie, dear Maggie'—here Laura dropped on her knees by the bed—'the door was pushed open a tiny bit for me to-night, just a little bit, and I looked inside. Love is a very, very beautiful thing, Maggie.'

'So it is,' said Maggie, who began to think of Jasmine. 'The love of one girl for another is a splendid thing; I can quite sympathise about that; I can really.'

'Of one girl for another!' said Laura in a tone of great contempt. 'Oh, what folly you talk! Mr Grey said'——

'What did he say?' said Maggie. 'Out with it; don't beat about the bush any more. Out with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and then, for goodness' sake, leave me.'

Even this very rough-and-ready invitation to unburden her mind was accepted by Laura. She

began a silly speech, the sum total of which amounted to very little. Mr Grey had praised her eyes; had said that by-and-by she would be a very charming girl, that he hoped he might be present when she made her *début*, and that he trusted, when that time came, to be allowed the privilege of a great friendship with the young *débutante*. There was practically nothing in his words, but as he had accompanied them by looks, and as looks, after all, can convey any meaning, Laura felt sure of the fact that he was deeply in love with her, and would declare his passion when she was grown up.

'It is quite between ourselves at present,' she said in conclusion. 'As he is going away the first thing in the morning, I am not likely to meet him again for some time. But I shall live on the memory of this evening. I shall treasure each word that he uttered. He asked me for a flower, too. I forgot that part. I had a rose in my belt, and I gave it to him. Yes, I have had a wonderful time.'

'I suppose so,' said Maggie. 'It seems to me that you make a fuss about nothing; but perhaps I am wrong. Now go.'

Laura very reluctantly took up her candle.

'You will understand some day, poor Maggie!' she said; 'although it is unlikely that any man will look at you as Mr Grey looked at me to-night.'

'I hope to goodness no one will,' said Maggie. 'I think it would be odd. I want a man to come up to me when the time comes, and say, "Will you marry me?" then to add, "Now or never, miss." If I say, "Never," the thing is at an end; if I say, "Now," why, it is settled up quick, and we get spliced as soon as possible. Them 's my views. I don't want to be bothered with looks and meanings put into looks. All I want is plain words, and the job completed.'

'You are queer,' said Laura.

As there was nothing further to be said, she left the room. Maggie tossed and moaned during all the night that followed. Her dreams were lurid and full of distress. But towards morning some of her worst symptoms abated. Her head ached less violently. She was intensely thirsty, and creeping out of bed, she took a long, long draught of cold water. Then she lay down again and slept until morning.

Laura meanwhile, being really perturbed, slept also very badly. She envied Juliet her placid repose and her gentle, sonorous breathing. She tossed from side to side on her pillow, and longed for time to hurry its pace, and for the blissful moment to arrive when she should slip out of her chrysalis 'a thing of beauty' and 'a joy for ever.' She dwelt again, and yet again, on Mr Grey's delicious words, on his still more delightful looks, on all that he had said, and still more on all that

he had left unsaid. Could anything have been more wonderful than the manner in which he had taken that rose when she drew it from her belt and presented it to him? Oh, those eyes of his were enough to draw the heart of any girl!

The next morning Laura felt exceedingly indisposed for her workaday life, and altogether inclined to take a high hand with that very insignificant person, her young sister Juliet. Juliet was dressed before Laura, and ran downstairs. She came back after a time holding a withered rose in her hand.

'I was watching you last night,' she said, 'and I saw you give this to Mr Grey. I ran into the drawing-room to fetch a book, and found it on the carpet. He could not have thought so much of it, after all, when he left it there quite forgotten. Ah, you don't look pleased, old Lau, but you can't help yourself. The rose was on the carpet. Here it is back; it is the identical one you gave him.'

'He dropped it through an accident,' said Laura, trying to conceal her intensely mortified vanity. She mistook this mortification for a deeper feeling. She struggled against it, and tried to force herself to the conclusion that Mr Grey was now, in a distracted state, searching through all his possessions for the lost rose. The idea even flashed through her mind that if she knew his address she might enclose it to him. But, fortunately for

herself, she was saved this last humiliating step; for at breakfast that morning Miss Simpson greeted her two pupils Laura and Juliet with several interesting items of information. One was this: Maggie was ill and in bed, and the doctor had been sent for. The second was far more vital to Laura: Mr Grey was engaged to be married, and had confided the whole thing to no less a person than Miss Simpson herself on the previous night—had chatted with the governess for a long time after the girls had gone to bed, and had shown her a tiny miniature of his betrothed which he wore in a locket pendent to his watch-chain.

'Such a pretty little dark girl,' said Miss Simpson, dealing her blows with unerring cruelty—'somewhat like Maggie in appearance. I congratulated him most heartily. They are to be married this summer, and he is devoted to her. She is rich, I believe. Poor Mr Grey will require a rich wife, for he has no private means of his own.'

Poor Laura could scarcely eat any breakfast. She passed a day of some depression, and did not allude ever again to Mr Grey's remarks, or to the fact that she had once stood on the threshold of the Temple of Love, and had even peered a little way within the sacred enclosure.

Meanwhile the thoughts of the household were all centred on Maggie—Maggie, whom Laura had thought so little of on the previous night, whose feverish slumbers she had so ruthlessly disturbed,

and who was in bed with a high temperature and aching limbs. The doctor came, and said that she had taken a bad chill. How she had taken it no one could ascertain. Every one testified to the fact that she had been in excellent health when Mercy had helped her to dress for dinner on the previous night. Lord Dunbar could have thrown light on the circumstance had he been questioned, but a letter which arrived by that morning's post had necessitated his immediate return to town. He had left a little note for Maggie, but she was considered far too ill to receive it. What could be the matter? What could have caused this strange and sudden illness?

Laura was so covered with chagrin during the morning that she scarcely gave her sick sister a thought, but by the afternoon she had so far recovered from the pin-scratch which Mr Grey had carelessly inflicted that she was able once again to concentrate her thoughts. She was glad of an object to concentrate them on, and Maggie proved herself an agreeable subject for meditation. She recalled now with great vividness Maggie's remarkable words about the bramble. She remembered the scratch on Maggie's cheek, and Maggie's refusal to enlighten her on the matter. She also remembered Maggie's terror when she proposed to open the cupboard door to get some further wraps to put about her. When, therefore, she heard Miss Simpson say as they went down to their early

dinner that Maggie's illness was quite incomprehensible, and that she wished she knew how she had got it, Laura immediately volunteered to say:

'I can tell you something, if you like.'

'You can?' said the governess, stopping short. 'What can you know about it, Laura?'

'Only that I went into her room late last night.'

'You did? How wrong of you! You know you girls are not allowed to visit each other in your rooms after Mercy has put out the lights.'

'I broke the rule last night,' said Laura. 'I am sorry, but I did so.'

Her eyes looked pleadingly at Miss Simpson. Not for worlds would she let the governess know the true reason of her visit to Maggie. Maggie, whatever her sins, was good enough not to laugh at poor Laura for her folly. Juliet, of course, would not dare to; but Miss Simpson had an unmerciful tongue and a cruelly mocking laugh when she chose. Miss Simpson must never guess that Laura had built a little castle in the air, and that that castle was absolutely demolished by the information which the governess had given her.

'You are quite forgiven, of course,' said Miss Simpson, 'as you have confessed that you are sorry. I am the last person to punish for trifles; only, as a rule, do remember, Laura, that you are expected to obey. You are not much restricted by anything in this sort of Liberty Hall, but the few rules imposed upon you must be adhered to.'

'Yes, yes,' said Laura impatiently. 'Do you want me to tell you any more about Maggie or not?'

'Of course, my dear.'

'I thought she looked ill when I went into the room,' said Laura. 'She was having a bad dream, in fact, when I entered, and was shouting out about a bramble and a letter. Oh dear, how queer you look, Miss Simpson! Do you know anything?'

'A letter?' repeated Miss Simpson.

'Yes, a letter. She said she would find it. Of course it was only a dream.'

'Oh, of course,' said Miss Simpson.

'Then,' continued Laura, 'when I went up to the bedside I saw that she had a great scratch on her cheek. I asked her about it, and she would not tell me. I think perhaps the bramble'——

'I don't want your conjectures, Laura. Well—anything else?'

'She looked very hot; her face was scarlet.'

'Had she any other symptoms?'

'No, except such a funny one. She looked boiling, but she said she was icy cold.'

'Ah—rigor,' said Miss Simpson, who had a slight knowledge of medicine.

'Then,' continued Laura, 'when I offered to go to the cupboard to get a shawl or wrap of some sort to put over her, she got terribly agitated, and screamed out to me that I was not to go near it.

That is all. She was queer the whole time; I could not understand it.'

'Well, come in now, dears, and have lunch,' said Miss Simpson.

The girls and the governess had lunch by themselves that day, for the visitors, one and all, had decided to move on to gayer quarters now that there was real illness in the house. Miss Simpson was very silent during the meal, but her thoughts were busy. When it was over, she desired Laura and Juliet to betake themselves to the garden to amuse themselves there quietly, and not to trouble her, for she would be busy with Maggie, looking after her and attending on her for the remainder of the day.

When the doctor had suggested that perhaps it might be well to get in a trained nurse, Miss Simpson had been the one to interfere. She would so much rather nurse her dear, dear pupil herself; and, with the aid of Mercy, it would surely not be difficult. The doctor had looked at the governess, and had thought what a kind and self-sacrificing person she was, and what an efficient and pleasant nurse she would make for his patient! So he decided to leave the matter of a trained nurse in abeyance for the present, for most likely Maggie's illness would yield to treatment and she would be out of the wood by the following day.

Miss Simpson now went upstairs to her own

room. There she took a letter out of her pocket. It was the letter which Lord Dunbar had given her for Maggie. It was addressed 'Miss Maggie Massereene' in that nobleman's small and upright hand. Miss Simpson felt that it was necessary for the true interest of her pupil that she should herself become acquainted with the contents of that letter. Maggie might not get well unless her illness was traced to its source. Accordingly, by the aid of hot water, she raised the flap of the envelope and acquainted herself with the brief contents of the note which lay within:

'My dear Maggie'—it ran—'I have been to the spot you indicated, but there is no letter. I hope to be back again at Castle Mary next week. Keep up your heart.—Your affectionate friend,

'Dunbar.'

So there *was* a mystery about a letter. This was the governess's thought. There was also a mystery about a bramble—a bramble and a letter. Miss Simpson stuck the flap of the envelope down again, and went quietly into her pupil's room. Maggie was asleep. Now was the governess's opportunity. She had a footfall soft as a cat's. She approached the cupboard door. She opened it. She found the beautiful Indian muslin dress with the front breadth cruelly torn, rent asunder in that jagged way which a rough tear would cause. She

noticed that the edge of the skirt was muddy and much disfigured. She took up the dainty white silk stockings. Even now they were sodden and damp. She gazed at the ruined white satin shoes; they were also damp; they could never be used again.

The little mystery was plain. Maggie had gone out on an adventure. Maggie had broken the strictest rule of her life. She had in all probability sat in her stockings—her white satin shoes and damp stockings—for the rest of the evening. Hence the mystery of her illness. The thing was clear as daylight.

Miss Simpson sat down where her eyes could rest upon the still flushed face of her pupil. Maggie was better, but far from well. Her temperature was still high, and her breathing hurried. Miss Simpson laid the little note—looking carefully at it to see that it bore no mark of having been ruthlessly torn asunder—on the table by Maggie's side.

By-and-by the girl awoke, fixed her eyes on her governess, and said:

'Where am I? What has happened?'

'You are better, dear,' said Miss Simpson in a cheerful tone. 'I will ring the bell and desire Mercy to get you some tea. A cup of tea and a little piece of toast would refresh you.'

'I should like the tea, please,' said Maggie, 'but not the toast; I can't eat anything.'

'Well, dear, you shall have the tea alone. Now, cheer up, love; you will soon be all right.'

'Will you put another pillow under my head, please?' asked Maggie.

Miss Simpson complied. Mercy entered the room. Miss Simpson ordered the tea, and Mercy departed. As Miss Simpson was arranging a little wrap round her pupil's shoulders, the said pupil saw the note on the table. She coloured first, and then turned pale.

'For me?' she said.

'Yes; Lord Dunbar had to leave this morning, and gave me this to give you. He was sorry to hear that you were ill. Are you too weak to read it, love? Shall I open it and read you the contents?'

'Oh no, thank you; please, I won't read it at present.'

'A little mystery, dear?'

'Not—not exactly.'

'Maggie, you might tell your old governess what is wrong.'

'There is nothing special.'

'I see you are dying to read your letter. Oh, my child! do read it; never mind me. I will turn my back to you if you wish. I will sit here by the window and continue my plain sewing. I am altering a white petticoat, and I am quite glad of the opportunity to get on with it. One wants so many of these frilled things in the present day.

Now then, love, go on as if I were not present. Forget your Maud; read your secret. I am the last to pry.'

With a hand that trembled, Maggie did open the letter. She read the contents. A faint sort of groan passed her lips. She slipped the letter back into its envelope and laid it on the little table.

'Anything wrong, dear?'

'Nothing.'

Miss Simpson considered. She came to a quick resolution. Maggie would be better if she told; her mind was labouring under a burden. It would be best for her pupil if that strain and weight were removed.

'It is like performing an operation,' thought the governess. 'The operation is necessary for the health of the patient. The sooner it is got over the better. Now, Maggie's dear mind wants an operation performed on it, and I am the last person to hesitate when the mental knife is necessary.'

Accordingly, Miss Simpson got up swiftly, and approaching the bed, looked down at her pupil.

'You have been a naughty, naughty girl,' she said; 'and, like the children in the story-book, the sooner you 'fess the better.'

'What do you mean?'

For answer, Miss Simpson bent forward and

touched the rough and ugly scratch on Maggie's smooth cheek.

'How did that get there? Why had you a dream about a bramble and a letter? And above all things, how did this happen?'

Swiftly Miss Simpson went to the cupboard, flung the door open, and revealed the muslin dress, the damp stockings, the ruined shoes.

'How did this happen?' she repeated. 'Maggie, if you don't tell me I shall be obliged to show these to the doctor. The doctor will be obliged to speak to your mother. I leave you to judge of the result.'

Maggie trembled very much, and beyond doubt her temperature went up. But Miss Simpson firmly, and with apparent kindness, probed and probed, until little by little the girl told her story: her great anxiety to get the letter which Jasmine was to send to her, her secret visit to the stable-yard, her interview with James and his story with regard to the lost letter, her desperate flight one-third up Turk's Cap, her frantic scramble in the dark, her vain search for the letter, her return to the house, and her long, long sitting in the drawing-room in her sopping shoes and stockings.

'I forgot to change them,' said Maggie. 'I was unconscious that they were wet for some time; when I did remember, it was too late.'

'Now, perhaps you will tell me, as you have

told me so much, what Lord Dunbar's letter contains.'

'He was sorry for me,' said Maggie. 'He—he sympathised; he—he is not like others. He went this morning to look for that letter, but it was nowhere to be found. I wish—I wish I could get it.'

'You poor, silly little thing!' said Miss Simpson. 'Well, of course you have been desperately naughty, and were I to tell your mother it would be Howgate Manor on the spot. But you know your Maud would not be really unkind to you, and all I ask from you in the future is perfect confidence. Don't try to keep secrets from me, you silly child, for you see how easily I can discover them. And now, rest assured that I will not betray you. I will not reveal even to Mercy the fact that you went away unbidden last night; that you were such a disgraceful young girl as to wander the roads in the dark and in your evening-dress. I will protect you, Maggie; I will do what a true woman should to screen you. These slippers shall be removed from the cupboard; I will explain to Mercy that I have taken them away in order to clean them by a new process myself. They are ruined, but I will manage to give you another pair, child, exactly like these. The stockings I will wash myself, but the Indian robe I will darn and send to the laundry with my own things. Thus, you see, my love, in confiding in me you have saved yourself. Aren't you glad?'

'Oh yes—yes!' said poor Maggie. 'I did not know you would be so kind. This is splendid. I am feeling better already.'

'Ah, and here comes tea.—Mercy, I think our little patient is doing nicely. We will take her temperature by-and-by, and you shall sit with her during the latter part of the afternoon. I, alas! have to go out, or I would not trouble you.'

'Of course I like to sit with my own Miss Maggie,' said the woman, who was intensely jealous of Miss Simpson, and never failed to show it.

'Well, put down the tea now, Mercy, and leave me with my pupil.—A little bit of toast, Maggie; can't you be tempted?'

'Well, then—a tiny bit,' said Maggie. 'I am beginning to feel just the weest bit hungry.'

Mercy left the room. Miss Simpson cut the toast in dainty fingers, buttered and salted it, and watched her pupil while she crunched the toast and sipped her tea.

'You are doing nicely, my love. You must rest again now for a couple of hours. I am going out. I have had a message from your dear mother, and must see her. It would never do to neglect your mother, Margaret.'

'No, indeed,' said Maggie. 'I wonder mother has not been to see me.'

'We have kept the worst of your illness from her, my child. I implored of the doctor to be careful; her nerves are very weak.'

'Oh yes—of course,' said Maggie. 'But was I so ill?' she added.

'You had a high temperature this morning, and Dr Moffat was really alarmed. My fear was that you might catch anything; but now that your appetite has returned, and you are, oh, much cooler, I think we shall have a delightful bulletin when he returns later in the day. Now then, I leave you. He will little guess—Dr Moffat—that I, your poor governess, was your best physician.'

'Indeed, he will not guess,' said Maggie, who could not help being intensely grateful to Miss Simpson.

Having so far speeded her pupil on the road to complete recovery, Miss Simpson visited Mrs Massereene in her boudoir. That lady was better. She was becomingly dressed, and was stretched as usual on a couch. Her room was very much heated, and was redolent of several subtle perfumes. The window blinds were partly drawn; the whole effect of the room was dim and rather unwholesome.

Miss Simpson came in gently.

'Ah, Miss Simpson, and how is Maggie? How is that little cold and hoarseness she complained of?'

'It was not an ordinary cold or ordinary hoarseness,' said Miss Simpson at once. 'The fact is, dear Mrs Massereene, Dr Moffat and I,

ever careful of your health, decided not to alarm you. This morning dear Maggie was very ill —high temperature, pains in all her bones, sore throat; in short, her symptoms might have led to anything.'

'And you kept me from my child! You concealed the truth! You deceived me!' said the mother.

Her face turned pink; her hands moved in an agitated fashion as she half-prepared to rise from her sofa, and half-inclined to remain there.

'I will tell you,' said Miss Simpson in her rarest voice—and that voice could be, oh, so delightful!—'that the danger is past. The child has mended rapidly. Her temperature, I am persuaded, is almost, if not quite, normal. The pains in her bones have vanished; she has just had a cosy little meal.'

'Oh, then it was nothing after all,' said Mrs Massereene. 'How silly to alarm me!'

'It might have been anything,' said the governess; 'but, thank God! it is nothing. Maggie will be all right in a day or two.'

'I am relieved. I suppose the child is having every care. If there is nothing serious, I would rather not go that long way to her room this afternoon. I am really very weary, and as there are no visitors in the house, I am taking the opportunity to have a thorough rest. That new masseuse arrived this morning. She has, without

doubt, the proper hand; but it exhausted me terribly—terribly. She is a most interesting woman—was once a lady-doctor, but failed to make a living—is doing splendidly as a masseuse. The prejudice against lady-doctors still continues to a ridiculous extent. Well, this woman says that I have been treated all wrong. She advocates quite a new régime for me. I am fully inclined to believe in her; she is beyond doubt exceedingly clever. She says that at first I must expect weariness, as her system brings into action muscles hitherto undeveloped. When they are sufficiently developed, I shall, she feels assured, be a different woman. Above all things, she preaches the gospel of rest. I must rest continuously; I must have no worries. She would be shocked to hear, would dear Mrs Dallas—Dallas is her name—that you had come to me with that story about Maggie.'

'Well, never mind; as the child is better, there is no cause even for a moment's uneasiness, I assure you—not one moment. Maggie will be up and out in a day or two.'

'Then let us dismiss the subject,' said Mrs Massereene. Miss Simpson, what about that other matter? I saw Margaret yesterday, and desired her to write to one of the girls on the hill-top. The letter was to be sent by a messenger. Were my directions attended to?'

'Yes,' said Miss Simpson, 'they were attended

to; but I am sorry to say that, through an accident, the letter in reply was lost.'

'Lost! What do you mean by that?'

'What I say. James the groom, a stupid sort of man, managed to let the pony fall as they were descending the hill. The letter was in James's hand, and it slipped out. It has been searched for; but I suppose the wind blew it away. Anyhow, it is not forthcoming.'

'How exceedingly tiresome! And I really, really wanted that matter put right. I am most anxious to see those three little girls. Let me see—to-morrow will be Friday. You must yourself go up to the hill-top to-morrow morning. Never mind lessons; the girls won't object to a holiday, and Margaret will be better for one. Ride up yourself, take my invitation, arrange the matter, invite the children down here at an early hour, and ask kind Mr Primrose from me to be so exceedingly good as to come in the evening and fetch them. Tell him that I shall expect him to dine—a *tête-à-tête* dinner—you might mention that. None of my guests are arriving till Monday. You see, Miss Simpson, this is an opportunity not to be despised. You will ride to the hill-top the first thing to-morrow morning.'

'Very well,' said Miss Simpson, who enjoyed, and did not enjoy, the prospect before her.

It was her object to have her finger in every

pie, and of course she must have one in the hill-top-and-Maggie-pie, as she called it. But she disliked immensely the long, hot ride to the top of that awful hill, and wished that some one else could undertake that duty for her. She might have sent Maggie, had Maggie been well; but that of course was out of the question now.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION.

MRS MASSEREENE, like most people of weak health and a tenacious, obstinate disposition, was the ruling power at Castle Mary. Her servants and attendants in their hearts despised her; but, nevertheless, they obeyed her, and served her faithfully. Her children also obeyed her, for she ruled with a rod of fear.

Miss Simpson knew that she must execute to the very letter that commission set her by Mrs Massereene. Mrs Massereene, for some extraordinary reason, wished to be friends with those tiresome, stupid people on the top of the hill. Miss Simpson was to be the stepping-stone to effect her purpose; and, however the governess might dislike her commission, she must carry it through.

Accordingly, she went round herself to the stable-yard to interview the men. She saw James, who had a handkerchief tied across his forehead, and looked more sheepish and stupid than ever.

'How did you hurt yourself, James?' said the governess.

'I got a bang on the 'ard 'igh road,' was the man's reply. 'Marcy I didn't 'ave my skull split open. That 's an awful 'ill, miss!'

'Yes, I know all about it,' said Miss Simpson.

'Little miss were wild with I for losin' the letter, but I couldn't 'elp mysel' no'ow.'

'Never mind about the letter now, James. I have to go to the top of the hill to-morrow. I must ride up. I shall require some one to attend me; you had better come.'

'Don't ask me, miss! I'd be that frighted.'

'Very well, I won't; I will find another groom and a safe horse. James, you will be careful not to repeat to any one that Miss Margaret was in the stable-yard last night.'

James looked solemn and puzzled. He scratched his head and nodded, saying as he did so, 'Dawson were mad about that, and threatened to sack any of us as told on missie.'

'Dawson was right,' said Miss Simpson. 'I will consult with him about to-morrow.'

She slipped a shilling into James's palm. The man understood that it was a bribe of silence. Then Miss Simpson picked her way adroitly to the place where she believed the head-coachman was to be found. He was examining a very dainty carriage which had just been sent down from London.

'Dawson,' said the governess.

'At your service, miss,' replied the man.

'I have directions from Mrs Massereene,' said Miss Simpson, who knew that this information was necessary if she would have her orders carried out successfully. 'She wants me to ride to Mr Primrose's house early to-morrow morning. I must have a suitable horse for myself—a sure-footed beast who will not stumble, and who is accustomed to mountain-climbing; and I shall want a groom to accompany me in order to lead the horse. I shall start on my expedition at half-past eight o'clock in order to get the journey over before the heat of the day. You will attend to it—won't you, Dawson?'

'Yes, miss—sartain sure. If I may make bold, miss, how is our missie?'

'Do you mean Miss Margaret?'

'I mean Miss Maggie,' said the man. 'We none of us, so to speak, know the other young ladies.'

'Miss Margaret is very unwell, Dawson,' said Miss Simpson.

She paused to consider a minute. Oh yes, Dawson was safe enough; it would be rather nice to take him into her confidence.

'I understand, Dawson,' she said, fixing her eyes on the man's face, 'that you acted with great wisdom last night when Miss Margaret, contrary to the rules of the house, appeared in the stable-yard. I am exceedingly obliged to you. See that this affair goes no farther. Did

it by any chance reach your mistress's ears, poor Miss Margaret would be sent from home to a school—I regret to have to inform you, Dawson—where she would be treated with great severity; a sort of prison-school, Dawson, where the child would be practically deprived of her liberty.'

'Dear, dear!' said Dawson. 'Now, to think of that; and her like a wild colt, and with the freedom of a bird. Dear, dear! But she needn't fear anything from Dawson, nor from any of the men, for they have their orders.'

'You are a good soul, Dawson; I have always known it. I can do a good deal for you with Mrs Massereene, and for any of the men under you whom you happen to favour. I am in your mistress's most sacred confidence; she relies on me for everything. There is no point in the economy of the house that she does not consult me about. Poor Miss Margaret! she got into a great scrape owing to James's carelessness with regard to the letter. It has been the cause of her illness. The dear child has been grievously ill, but is now better. I have no time to go into particulars. See that I am well provided to-morrow, and send a horse round for me sufficiently sure-footed to climb the hill and to come down again safely.'

Dawson made the necessary promise, and spoke of James in no measured language of strong dis-

approval; and Miss Simpson went back to the house.

Maggie continued to improve. When Dr Moffat came again, her temperature was normal. He was highly pleased, and said she might get up on the following day.

When Miss Simpson went, the last thing at night, to kiss her pupil, she whispered in her ear, 'Everything turns out admirably; and to-morrow I ride to the hill-top with a pressing invitation to all your young friends to spend Saturday with us. I shall not be back until late, but expect the happiest tidings, my love. When ever did Maud Simpson fail in that which she undertook? Take care of yourself to-morrow, Maggie, for you will have a joyful time on the following day.'

Maggie was charmed at this information, and squeezed her governess's hand and returned her good-night kiss with fervour.

The next morning the governess rose early and started on her ride to the hill-top. She was a fearless rider, and looked exceedingly pretty in her neat little riding-habit. She was the sort of absolutely finished young person who must, she felt, appeal to the hearts of those savages who lived on the hill-top. She believed it would be very easy for her to see and to conquer. She apprehended not the slightest difficulty in the task assigned to her. They were all queer, of course;

but they would need this quality to a degree that never entered into Miss Simpson's category to refuse an invitation to such a house as Castle Mary.

The ride was hot; the sun beat on her head; the wind rose, too, and blew the dust into her eyes. The higher up she went the more strongly did the gale assail her. By the time she entered the shelter of the pine-wood she was conscious of a crooked hat, dishevelled locks, and a most decidedly irritable temper. The man who walked by her side was a silent, careful sort of person of the name of Sam. Sam had no opinions to offer on any subject; and Miss Simpson, after talking to him for a short time, decided to leave him alone. She felt better when she was in the shelter of the pines. She drew a deep breath, let her pony's reins slacken, and went meditatively, as did the ancient ladies of old, through the darkling wood.

She had gone some little distance—in fact, had nearly completed her ride through the grateful shade—when she saw a girl coming to meet her. This girl was Jasmine. She was not dressed in white, as she had been when Maggie saw her, but in a rough and ugly holland suit. She was wearing no hat—the hill-top girls seldom did; her face was rather disconsolate; her cheeks seemed pale and her eyes red as though she had been crying a great deal.

Miss Simpson pulled her pony up short, beckoned

to Sam to retire into the background, and waited for the girl to approach.

'Who are you?' said the governess as Jasmine drew nigh.

'I am Jasmine Primrose. Who are you?'

'My name is Miss Simpson. I have come all this long way from Castle Mary to visit you, Miss Jasmine Primrose, and your sisters, the Misses Violet and Daisy Primrose, and your honourable father, Mr Primrose. I have brought an important message to you. Will you kindly show me the way to your aerie on the top of the rock?'

'There is no manner of good in your going up,' said Jasmine, leaning against a tree, and allowing her woebegone face to show all its distress very plainly.

'What do you mean?' asked the governess in a tone of great surprise.

'What I say. If you have come from the Massereenes, you must just turn back and go home, for father doesn't wish any of us to know any of you. I can't help it. I am terribly sorry. I am very unhappy indeed about it. I—I wish I didn't mind. I am quite miserable! Do go back, please. Don't make things worse; you would not if you only knew.'

'But, poor little girl, what can be wrong?' said Miss Simpson, speaking now in her most delightful and melodious voice. 'What *is* the matter? Why,

you are crying, my child! Oh! tell your sorrows to Maud Simpson. She has the most sympathetic heart in the world.'

Jasmine began to feel Miss Simpson's charm. She certainly was sympathetic; and how pretty she was, and how beautifully dressed, and how altogether different from any one Jasmine Primrose had ever seen before!

Miss Simpson alighted from her pony, called to Sam to hold the reins, and walked with Jasmine through the wood. Jasmine repeated her story. It was all hopeless; she did not know why; she had not the faintest idea what the reason could be; but Mr Primrose was quite determined they were not to know each other. The little girls and the Massereenes were to be as strangers.

'Lord Dunbar spoke to father for a long time, and even he failed,' said Jasmine. 'On that very same day dear Maggie sent a man up on a pony. He brought me a note—such a sweet note!—oh, I broke my heart over it!—but I had to write a refusal—I had to, although it broke my heart! I have been crying about it ever since. I am quite miserable. I do not know how I can live like this any longer.'

'Poor little girl!' said Miss Simpson; 'I do pity you indeed. Do you know, Jasmine, that this matter is exceedingly serious?'

'Why?' said Jasmine. 'Why serious? I know

it is a great trouble. Lord Dunbar says I must be brave about it, but I just—can't.'

'Lord Dunbar is a very good man,' said Miss Simpson; 'but even he, good as he is, doesn't understand the heart of a girl. Now I, my dear little Jasmine, do. I am little more than a girl myself, so I can thoroughly sympathise with you. You look ill. You will be ill, you poor little thing! if you fret any longer. But that is not the worst, or anything like the worst, as far as I am concerned. Poor, dear Margaret—or Maggie, as you call her—is ill too. Yesterday she was very ill. She had a terrible sort of fever, all caused by her longing to see you. The poor child is nearly wild about you. The only thing that soothed her and made her better was the thought that when all else failed to bring you together I should succeed.'

'She must have known that it was hopeless,' said Jasmine, 'for I told her so in my letter.'

'But, my child, that is the sad part—she never got your letter.'

'Oh!' cried Jasmine, 'what do you mean?'

Miss Simpson proceeded to explain. She told the story of the lost letter, and of Maggie's mad walk in the dark to try and recover it. Jasmine was deeply affected. Her tears flowed afresh. Miss Simpson proceeded to press matters.

'From what you tell me,' she said, 'it does seem hopeless. My visit to your cottage might even do harm. But I have, after all, seen you. This meeting has been most fortunate, for I can depend on you; you will not breathe the fact that I met you in the wood.'

'I won't,' said Jasmine. 'I have never had any secrets before.' Then she hesitated, for she thought of her locket and chain. 'I mean,' she continued, 'that I have one other secret. I kept that, and I will keep this as well.'

'Yes, dear, I am sure you will. Now then, let me think. Jasmine, something must be done, and you must help me.'

'How?' asked Jasmine. 'I am sure I would if I could; but I can't.'

'You can; it is quite simple. The fact is this: are you, or are you not, brave enough to risk something for the sake of your friend?'

'I would do anything in the world for Maggie!'

'So you really love her as much as that?'

'Indeed, indeed I do. I never loved any one as I love her. I mean, of course, I love father and my sisters; but my love for Maggie is different.'

'Just as her love for you is different,' said Miss Simpson. 'This is a most remarkable friendship. There is not the slightest doubt that you are meant—you two girls—to be all in all to

each other. My dear child, Maggie pines for you now so much that her life may be in danger if you do not gratify her wish.'

'But I *can't*, Miss Simpson. How can I disobey father?'

'That is what I was wondering. Couldn't you just once?'

'Oh no, no, no! I couldn't—I wouldn't!'

'You have been brought up in a very narrow way,' said the governess. 'Now, would this not be possible? I want Maggie to get well. I want you and Maggie to meet. I could bring her into this wood.'

'But that would not be safe—it wouldn't. I could not do it. I could not meet her—I dare not!'

'Have you no friend in the plain—no person you ever go to see?'

'Oh yes; I go now and then to visit old Mrs Blake.'

'Who is Mrs Blake?'

'A dear old lady who lives in that red cottage not very far from the village. The cottage is covered with creepers. Mrs Blake sometimes has asked me to stay with her from Saturday to Monday.'

'The very thing! Could not you go to her to-morrow?'

'I should like to very much; but I can't pretend that she has asked me when she hasn't.'

'Suppose I get you an invitation, will you accept it? Will you do this for Maggie's sake?'

'Why, I wish I could. But it does seem awfully wrong.'

Jasmine sat down on a piece of fallen timber and covered her face with her hands. She was oppressed by a mad desire. Into her sheltered life had come temptation. She was so unaccustomed to temptation that it had a greater and more bewildering effect upon her than upon most girls.

'I see you will do it,' said Miss Simpson. 'Mrs Blake shall invite you, and you shall go to her from Saturday to Monday. I make no promises. I make no arrangements that you and Maggie shall meet. If you go to Mrs Blake nothing may happen at all; on the other hand, anything may happen. You know nothing. You pay your little visit as you have often done before. And now, don't keep me. I will ride straight home. Remember, Jasmine, in your hands lies practically the *life* of our dear, noble Maggie. Be brave; be firm. Your father will not refuse Mrs Blake. Good-bye, dear.'

Miss Simpson walked quickly to where Sam stood holding the pony's reins. She sprang lightly on the animal's back and retraced her journey to the foot of the hill. From there she galloped quickly to Mrs Blake's cottage. The old

lady was at home. Miss Simpson spoke with feeling. Mrs Blake was full of interest.

Of course dear little Jasmine should come to see her. She would send the necessary invitation without delay. The child was not looking well? How sad—how very sad! A little change would do her good. Sometimes that very bracing air was too much for the young girls; but she (Mrs Blake) would put matters right. Little Jasmine should have a taste of the milder airs of the plain. Mrs Blake would send her a letter by Harry, her gardener's boy. He often went up to the hill-top—two or three times a week, in fact; for Mrs Blake did many commissions for the Primroses. She was proud to say that she was their very, very greatest friend on the plain.

CHAPTER XI.

A GREAT CHANGE IN VIEW.

JASMINE returned home in time for dinner. She was troubled. There was a voice crying loudly in her heart. That voice was reproaching her, but she would not listen to it; she silenced it with a tremendous effort.

'Be quiet,' she said to it. 'I have the locket and the chain, and I will do this also for Maggie —my darling Maggie. If I am invited to Mrs Blake's, I will go there. I may not see Maggie at all; I do not suppose I shall, but I will visit Mrs Blake. I have done so before. Stop worrying me with your constant crying.'—'You are doing wrong, and you know it,' said the voice.—'I don't know it, and I won't listen to you.'

'Jasmine,' said Daisy, as they sat down to their cold beef and roast potatoes, 'how pale you look! What is the matter?'

'I am a little tired,' said Jasmine. 'I have been in the pine-wood all morning.'

'You ought not to come up the hill, Jasmine, when the sun is beating so fiercely,' said Mr Primrose, just glancing up from his plate for a moment, and fixing his short-sighted eyes on his

daughter. 'You don't look at all the thing, my love. The sun is extraordinarily hot for the time of year, and you ought not to be out in it. You had better stay quiet this afternoon.'

'I have had a headache,' said Jasmine; 'but I can't rest—I can't!'

She burst into sudden tears, left her place at the table, and went out of the room.

'What is the matter?' said Mr Primrose, turning in perplexity to his other daughters.

'I think,' said Violet, 'that Jasmine is fretting a good bit. She wants to see Maggie Massereene again.'

'I am exceedingly sorry the girl came here,' said Mr Primrose. He knit his brows in perplexity. After a time he said, 'I hope my children know that anything in the world that I can give them with honour they shall have. My daughters, I cannot give you this friendship with honour; therefore I withhold it.'

'Oh father!' said Violet, 'we quite understand.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I will speak to Jasmine,' she said; 'she must understand too.'

'I will talk to her myself presently,' said the Professor; 'don't worry her now, dears. Perhaps this is the time, however, to inform you of the fact that I have made definite arrangements to leave the hill-top for the winter. We shall, I trust, spend a long and happy summer here. On the first of November we go to London. Lord Dunbar

will take rooms for us in a house near the British Museum for the winter months; he and I will be engaged over our great compilation, and you girls shall take advantage of your London life to see picture galleries, to hear good music, and to have the very best instruction in painting and music yourselves. You will attend lectures on various subjects, and you, my Violet, will pass your examination, I trust, with honour. I have no desire, my dears, that you should live much longer the life of hermits.'

'But we don't want to be anything but hermits,' cried Violet. 'If hermits are like us, then they are the happiest people in the world. I have always read,' she continued, 'that sorrow and jealousy and pain come with the knowledge of life. I don't want these things. I would rather stay where we are.'

'And I too,' said Daisy.

Mr Primrose looked earnestly at the two innocent, pretty faces, the eyes so frank and wide open, the sweet, smiling lips, the clear complexions, and he wondered within his heart if he was doing right in taking these cherished flowers into an uncongenial clime. How would they bear it?

But as he pondered, another face came before him—the face of his youngest daughter. She had always been different from her sisters—more impetuous, more passionate. Even on the hill-top, even before that fatal day when Maggie Massereene

had intruded her brilliant presence into the midst of the home-nest, Jasmine had been visited by little fits of discontent. Her wings longed to soar; her young nature was tired of inactivity. She felt dwarfed in her mountain home.

'We must go,' said the Professor, and he rose from the table with a sigh. 'We must put away the old things and accept the new. In the summer we will come back, of course; but we shall never, never be the same again. My children, enjoy your present innocent and peaceful time—the time of your happy childhood, for it won't come back to you.'

He left the room. Violet looked at Daisy.

'I wish we were not going,' said Violet.

'And so do I,' said Daisy.

'But there is Jasmine,' said Violet again.

'Oh yes,' replied Daisy, 'she was never like us. Don't you remember, Vi, when she used to speak of herself as the third too many. I am afraid she will always have that sort of feeling.'

'She is different from us, certainly,' said Violet, 'but she is a darling for all that. She will be glad to think we are going to London; let us go out and tell her. Oh, there she is, standing by the yew-tree! How funny of her not to go inside under the shelter; but I think, notwithstanding what father said at dinner, she likes the sun to beat on her head.'

The girls went out.

'News, news!' said Violet.

Jasmine turned quickly. The colour flew into her face.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Our time on the hill-top will soon be over. What do you think, Jas? We shall winter in London—in London! Oh dear—try to realise it!'

'I am glad,' said Jasmine. 'But this is only the beginning of summer,' she added; 'winter is a long way off.'

'Oh,' said Daisy, 'how can you want the bright days to go? And,' she continued abruptly, 'whoever is that coming up the hill?'

Jasmine left her sisters and flew to meet a small boy who was toiling up the steepest part of the hill, and whom she recognised at once as Mrs Blake's gardener's assistant, Harry. Harry approached, panting and red.

'For you, miss,' he said, thrusting a note into Jasmine's hand. She opened it eagerly. There was her invitation, so nicely and carefully worded: Would Miss Jasmine honour a lonely old woman with her company, and would she come down on the following Saturday—to-morrow, in short—to spend a few days in her society?

'I want you very badly, my love,' said the writer, 'so just send "yea" or "nay" by the messenger, and I will be all ready for you.'

Again Jasmine's conscience spoke loudly, but she

whispered an angry 'Be quiet!' to its remonstrances, and, carrying the open letter in her hand, approached her sisters.

For a girl who lived on the hill-top to receive a letter was such a rare occurrence that the other girls naturally clustered round in amazement. Jasmine knew that she was pale. Her heart was beating so hard that she could scarcely bring herself to speak. She thrust the letter into Violet's hand and waited for her remarks.

'Why, it's the very thing,' said Violet; 'a change will do you no end of good. Shall I run and ask father? Oh, of course, I know he will be delighted.'

'No,' said Jasmine.

She had this rag of honour left, that she would not allow her sister to do her dirty work.

'No,' she continued, 'I will speak to father myself.' She motioned to Harry to sit down, and went into the house.

The Professor was in his study. Piles of papers and valuable books of reference surrounded him. He was wearing his strongest spectacles. He was absorbed in happy work. Into the presence of this work came his young and impetuous child.

'Father, here is a letter.'

'Lay it down, my dear.'

'Father, it is to me, and it wants an answer.'

'Then answer it, my love. I am exceedingly

'Father, here is a letter.'

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busy. I have just caught the thread of what has puzzled me for over a week; I dare not let it go. Answer your letter, Jasmine; don't disturb me now.'

'May I say "yes"? It is an invitation.'

'Certainly; only go.'

Jasmine left the room. She felt still more uncomfortable. Nevertheless, there was but one course to pursue. She ran to her room and wrote an eager acceptance of Mrs Blake's kind invitation. She would go down to Mrs Blake's cottage at an early hour on the following morning. She would love to go. It would be such a great treat to be with her old friend, and to live on the plain for a little.

When she had despatched her acceptance she felt less restless and happier. She had burned her boats; there was no turning back now. At tea-time the Professor had returned from the clouds, and when Violet informed him that Jasmine was going to stay for a few days with old Mrs Blake he seemed much pleased.

'I am very glad indeed,' he said. 'Mrs Blake is one of my most valued friends. You can only get good in her society, and a little change of this sort will quite restore you, my child. I trust, my dear Jasmine, that you will leave the spirit of discontent behind you in the plain, for it by no means suits our mountain air.'

Jasmine could not reply, but her eyes filled with

tears. Early the next day she parted from her sisters and her father, and, accompanied by Betty—who always went down to the plain on Saturday on housekeeping cares intent—went off. Her simple belongings had been packed by Betty herself, and, folded now in a large white silk handkerchief, were carried on the end of a stick over the old woman's shoulder. The girl, the old woman, and the bundle made a primitive sort of procession as they left the hill-top and went down into the sultry plain.

By the time they had reached Mrs Blake's exceedingly pretty and exquisitely furnished cottage, Jasmine felt both tired and hot. On the threshold of the little house Betty deposited the bundle.

'There is your Sunday go-to-meeting frock in that,' she said, 'and a pair of house-shoes, and three handkerchiefs; also your brush and comb, and the other things you will want for the night. Now, be careful of your clothes, Miss Jasmine; obey Mrs Blake, keep tidy, and if you are offered plain sewing don't refuse to do it. I have put your thimble in the pocket of your Sunday frock. Now, good-bye to you, miss. We will expect you back Tuesday or Wednesday.'

Off trotted Betty, and Jasmine turned to sound a *rat-tat-tat* on the little bright brass knocker. There was no bell to the front door; the little old-fashioned knocker was quite sufficient for Mrs

Blake's fancy. For Mrs Blake herself was very nearly as old-fashioned as the people on the hill-top. She disliked the world and the world's ways, but she was a thoroughly comfortable and sympathetic old body; and, of all the Primrose girls, she had the greatest sympathy for Jasmine.

Mrs Blake had a maid called Susan; and if Betty could have had a twin sister in the world, Susan might have been the one, for she was as like her in appearance and manners as one pea out of the same pod resembles its brother pea. Susan wore a little white mob-cap tied round with a band of black ribbon, a black dress to match, and an enormous and very voluminous white linen apron. The apron very nearly covered her dress, and was full of innumerable pockets: some for keys, some for account-books, some for what she called heterogeneous matter. As a little child, Jasmine had dreamt of these pockets, and been fascinated by them. On the rare occasions when Susan had allowed the child to sit on her knee, Jasmine's favourite occupation had been exploring their contents. She had dived into the right-hand pocket and taken out a nutmeg-grater and a couple of nutmegs; in the left a pair of scissors pricked her small fingers, but a large thimble consoled them; and in a pocket just at one side of Susan's ample chest she discovered some large, smooth, egg-like sweetmeats. Straightway they were transferred to her mouth, and, lo

and behold! they contained the essence of all that was delightful—sugar in its unadulterated state, and a huge almond beneath.

Those happy days were gone by, but Jasmine still owned to a thrill when Susan with her pockets appeared in view.

'Ah, Miss Jasmine, here you are, and you are welcome,' said that good woman now. 'You just come in and see my mistress, and then I will take you upstairs to your room. I am getting the dinner ready—beefsteak-pudding, and apple-dumplings afterwards. I know your tastes, Miss Jasmine. But come along at once to see my mistress.'

Jasmine followed willingly enough. Susan flung open the door of a tiny sitting-room, and Jasmine found herself in the presence of the lady of the house.

This lady was exceedingly *petite* and exceedingly prim. She was made on the smallest scale possible without being absolutely deformed. She had tiny hands and tiny feet, and a wee face with large black eyes. Her hair was white as the driven snow, but her eyebrows and eyes were both dark. She had dainty features and an olive-tinted complexion. In her own way, Mrs Blake was a beauty. No one ever looked at her without turning to look again. She always dressed in black, except when she chose to embellish herself with white laces of priceless worth.

She was wearing a white lace cap to-day, and

its lappets fell softly against her withered cheeks. She had little mittens on her hands, and her high-heeled satin shoes made a slightly clicking noise as she walked. She came quickly across the room when Jasmine appeared, and laid one of her tiny hands on the girl's arm.

'How you grow, my love!' she said; and Jasmine, looking down, saw the sparkling of diamonds on her fingers. She remembered her own diamond locket, and longed to exhibit it. She might do so here; there would be no harm in doing so here.

'Oh!' she said, finding her voice and speaking with intense delight, 'I am so glad to come; it was so sweet of you to ask me. I am very, very happy to come.'

'And I to see you, my dear Jasmine. But now go upstairs with Susan. If you do anything to spoil Susan's dinner, woe betide you! Susan is the real mistress of this house; I am only an accessory. Go now at once, my dear, and be quick.'

So Jasmine turned to leave the room, and came back again in an incredibly short space of time, her pretty hair brushed neatly back, her hands washed, her dress neat. She must, she supposed, keep her white muslin dress for Sunday wear, although she longed to put it on at once. In this dainty house, with its most dainty mistress, she felt herself large, overgrown, and singularly unrefined.

The dinner which immediately followed Jasmine's arrival was a most dainty affair. The beefsteak-pudding had very little beef in it, but a great deal of game and all sorts of rare dainties. The apple-dumplings were like no other apple-dumplings that Jasmine had ever tasted. The old lady insisted on her having a thimbleful of port to help to digest the good food, as she expressed it; and when Jasmine had nibbled walnuts and dried fruits to her heart's content, and when Mrs Blake had told her that this was the time for her (Mrs Blake's) daily nap, and that go she must and enjoy it even if there were fifty Jasmines in the house, the little girl felt, somehow, that the lines had fallen to her in pleasant places, and that she was really happy. Something, anything might happen, but she was prepared. Mrs Blake gave Jasmine *carte-blanche* to do just what she liked.

'Go into the garden,' she said, 'and play with Tiny.' Tiny was her pet toy terrier. 'Read any book you come across. I dare say you know them all, but I myself am never tired of *Peter Parley's Annual*. You will find rows of that delightful book in the cabinet behind the green-silk door.'

Jasmine promised to make herself quite happy, and Mrs Blake trotted off to get her rest. Susan, having removed the pudding and dumplings, was supposed to be also quite *perdue*, and the girl had practically the house to herself.

'Now, what can be going to happen?' she

thought. Her heart beat; she went and pressed her face to the window-pane. She could not see very far either up the road or down the road from the red cottage; but, somehow, she knew by the beating of her heart that an unexpected delight was very near.

CHAPTER XII.

DEEPER AND DEEPER.

WHILE Jasmine was waiting for Maggie, hardly daring to admit even to herself that she was waiting for her, that young lady was getting ready for the reception of Jasmine. Surely no one had ever played her cards with more consummate care than had Miss Simpson, the Massereenes' most excellent and most trusted governess. She returned to Castle Mary with a carefully prepared story. She had an interview with Mrs Massereene. This took place before she saw Maggie or any of the girls. To Mrs Massereene she said that only Jasmine could at present avail herself of the most kind invitation which had been vouchsafed to all the hill-top girls. Jasmine was coming down to spend a few days with a certain Mrs Blake, and while there could of course visit the castle. Did Mrs Massereene happen to know Mrs Blake? Mrs Massereene declared at once that of course she knew Matilda Blake.

'My husband was a great friend of hers, and during his lifetime she used to visit us constantly. There is no woman in the whole country-side

more respected than Mrs Blake, but she is considered eccentric. Of late she has lived very much alone, and she does not care to go into society; but she invariably sees me when I call, and, in short, we are excellent friends although we don't meet very often.'

'Well, Jasmine Primrose is going to stay with Mrs Blake,' repeated Miss Simpson. 'She arrives there to-morrow. What I propose is this: that I should call for her to-morrow afternoon and bring her to the castle for a few hours.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Mrs Massereene, a little impatiently; she was not especially interested in Jasmine. It was the Professor she wanted to see.

'But what about the others—when are they coming?' she asked.

'I could not gather exactly when,' answered Miss Simpson; 'but doubtless Jasmine will tell you. I believe,' she added, 'that Professor Primrose is very busy just now over some literary work.'

'He was always busy over literary work,' said Mrs Massereene, with a peevish sort of pout. 'It was that that spoiled his life. Well, Miss Simpson, and how do you like the family, taken as a whole?'

'Oh, very much,' replied Miss Simpson, who felt that she was on delicate ground.

'And the cottage—what was it like?'

'It was just like any other cottage,' answered the governess, longing feverishly to change the subject.

'And did you see the Professor himself?' said Mrs Massereene.

Here was a poser. Should Miss Simpson tell a lie, or should she not? She felt at that moment that if she hesitated, the castle in the air that she was so carefully building would topple to pieces at her feet. The lie must be told. She said, therefore, with an emphatic voice, 'Of course I saw him—a most striking-looking man.'

'Ah, is he not?' said Mrs Massereene eagerly. 'He was remarkably handsome in his youth. Does he look old now?'

'No, not really old, only interesting. You know the sort of expression a very clever man would wear when he is, say, on the shady side of forty?'

'Oh, my dear, good creature, he is on the shady side of fifty, if he is a day; but of course I understand. Well, I am glad you saw him. He seemed pleased with my invitation, did he?'

'Very, very pleased.'

'And he is not going to call to-day?'

'No; but doubtless he may have spoken to Jasmine. You see, Jasmine is coming to visit Mrs Blake; therefore she will be your first guest

from the hill-top. Now, may I go? Maggie must be waiting for me.'

Mrs Massereene signified that the governess might leave her.

'On the whole,' she said, 'you have performed your task very well. We shall have a good deal to do with the family in the future, and I am glad of it—very glad.'

Miss Simpson left her employer's room feeling, as she afterwards expressed it, as though she had gone through fire. She went to her room, removed her habit, and got into some of her ordinary clothes. She then went straight to Maggie's bedroom.

Maggie was much better—in fact, quite convalescent, but not up yet.

'Good news, Maggie!' said her governess. She shut the door, went up to the girl, and told her exactly what had occurred. 'You will meet to-morrow,' she said. 'I shall go myself to Mrs Blake's, and bring Jasmine back to spend the afternoon and evening with you. You and she must then arrange between yourselves what further steps you will take. I am sorry that all this should be *sub rosa*, but there is no other way.'

'Oh, but—but—it seems wrong,' said Maggie.

'Then,' said Miss Simpson, her eyes flashing fire, 'you need not see her; she will be close to you on the plain—within a stone's-throw—but

you need not meet. No harm will be done. She will go back to her hill-top early in the week—probably on Monday.'

'I cannot stand that,' said Maggie.

'I thought you couldn't. I felt sure of it. Well, please yourself. I have given you the means of enjoying her society; take them or leave them. I have made up a story which will satisfy your mother. She imagines that I have seen Professor Primrose, and that you and Jasmine will arrange to meet her. Neither you nor Jasmine must undeceive her. I cannot do anything more. My head aches; I am dead tired. I don't think there is any gratitude in the world.'

'Oh, indeed, indeed,' cried Maggie, 'you don't know how I love you for all that you have done!'

'Well then,' said the governess, 'prove your love by not getting me into a scrape. Were what has happened to-day known I should lose my situation. I am not rich like you, *mignonne*. I have to toil for my daily bread, and were I deprived of this home I should be in difficulties such as you have never dreamed about, my pretty little Margaret. Now get up; you are much better. I cast myself on your honour and on the honour of Jasmine Primrose. If either of you two girls are worth your salt you will do nothing—nothing whatsoever—to betray me.'

As Miss Simpson uttered the last words she left the room. Maggie lay for a time quite quiet

in bed. The fever had completely passed; she was only deliciously convalescent; and she was happy—there was no doubt of that. The ache which had gone on aching in her heart ever since she had parted from Jasmine was soothed. Soon—in a few hours—she and Jasmine would meet once more. Jasmine had become, owing to the difficulty of their future intercourse, the one passionate desire of Maggie's heart. Whether their friendship would ever have ripened to its present dimensions but for these said difficulties was more than doubtful. Bring two romantic girls to meet each other, to perceive that each has something in common with the other, and then put an extinguisher on the friendship, and, behold! the ill-treated thing will struggle, will grow, will burst its bonds.

This was precisely what happened in the cases of Maggie Massereene and Jasmine Primrose. In a school they would probably have been friends, but only friends—nothing more. In the crowd they might have met and passed on, and thought little more each of the other. But one from her home on the hill-top, and the other from her castle on the plain, felt now as though invisible chains drew them together; and so strong was this feeling that rectitude, honour, all the training even which Jasmine had received, were powerless to overthrow that which was implanted in their young hearts.

Maggie presently sprang out of bed, dressed

hastily, declared to Mercy, who came into the room, that she felt just as well as ever she had done, and ran off to find her sisters. Her escapade of a day or two ago was quite forgotten. She was her ordinary self—in fact, much nicer than her ordinary self. During the rest of that day Laura and Juliet found Maggie the most fascinating companion. She shared their pursuits; she rejoiced in their joys; she sorrowed in their sorrows. Even Laura received a slightly sympathetic word when she showed her sister the withered rosebud which had been found, tumbled and broken, on the floor of the drawing-room; and also when she still further confided that while Mr Grey was saying those pretty nothings and had been looking at her with, oh! such an expression in his eyes, he had been engaged to another girl all the time.

'Then you won't be a goose any more,' Maggie had replied. But she had spoken kindly and without any snappishness.

In the evening she went by special invitation to sit with her mother for half-an-hour. As usual, Mrs Massereene was lying on the sofa.

'How are you, mummie?' said Maggie. 'Better?'

'I am rested,' replied her parent. 'My new masseuse advocates perfect quiet while the treatment is at its height.'

'What treatment, mummie?'

'Oh, massage, darling, but done in quite a

new way. I assure you it will have a marvellous effect on me, but the first few days are very tiring. However, I trust to be in the drawing-room on Monday, when my next guests arrive. Meantime, I am very glad, Maggie, that you have recovered. You will have a little friend to bear you company to-morrow.'

'Do you mean Jasmine Primrose, mother?'

'Yes, my dear child, I do. I shall be interested to see her. You must bring her to me for a few minutes.'

'Thank you, mummie, I will.'

'If she is the least like her father she must be a nice child,' said Mrs Massereene.

'She is very nice indeed,' said Maggie.

'You can play with her,' continued her parent; 'you can share your amusements with her, and be generous to her, Maggie; give her anything that she specially fancies. She is not rich, and you are; but she must be exceedingly nice. I should like her to come and stay here.'

'Oh mummie, if she only could!'

'What! you want her as much as all that?' said the mother, pinching Maggie's ear.

'I want her more than anything on earth,' said the child, surprised at her mother's sudden wish to gratify her.

'Then you shall have your wish as far as I am concerned. I have often noticed, Margaret, that you, Laura, and Juliet are, as it were, divided.

Juliet goes with Laura, Laura with Juliet. You are often out of it.'

'That is true.'

'How many girls, my love, are there on the hill-top?'

'Three, mother.'

'Then,' said Mrs Massereene after a pause, 'perhaps Jasmine is out of it too. Why should not you and Jasmine make a couple all to yourselves?'

'Mummie,' said Maggie, speaking with great fervour, 'there is nothing on earth I would not do for you if you could bring that about!'

As Maggie spoke she threw herself with an impetuous movement half-across her parent, and smothered her with kisses.

'Not quite so rough, my love; you take my breath away. Perhaps, Margaret, this other child may teach you consideration. I have had this thought in my head for the last few hours—ever since dear Miss Simpson came and told me what has occurred.'

'What did she tell you, mummie?'

'Only that the rest of the family could not visit us just yet, but that little Jasmine would come. Well, as Jasmine comes first, she shall have the greatest share of the triumph. She shall be the delightful first guest of the family. We will make much of her; she shall be *your* guest, Margaret; you understand what that means?

What you wish for shall be granted. We will immediately invite her to stay with us. The poor child can share Miss Simpson's instructions—far better for her than anything she can get on the hill-top.'

'But she says her father teaches her.'

'Does he?' said Mrs Massereene, speaking in a slight tone of hesitation. 'And he is wonderfully clever. Well, well! she must learn the womanly things, and the Professor cannot give her these. You shall do what you like for her and with her, Margaret. Why, how handsome you look, my child! Your eyes shine so brightly. You will be quite good-looking if you go on improving at that rate. But here comes Mrs Dallas.—Mrs Dallas, I see that you disapprove of so much talking.'

'Yes, madam,' said the masseuse, speaking in a low, carefully modulated voice; 'it is very bad for you while you are undergoing the treatment. Perhaps miss would go now.'

'You see, Maggie,' said her parent, 'how completely I am under rule. Well, I must obey; the result will be so delightful. Mrs Dallas promises me buoyant youth and radiant health if I am patient for a little.'

'And if miss will go,' said the ex-doctor, looking with small favour at the excitable Maggie.

Maggie immediately took her departure, and that night hardly slept. It was announced at

breakfast the next morning that Jasmine Primrose was coming to spend some hours at Castle Mary, and that the girls were to give her a good time. Both Laura and Juliet were curious to hear all about her. Maggie felt impatient; she wanted her friend to herself. She had suffered so acutely about Jasmine that her sisters seemed to her terribly in the way.

'They have gone through nothing,' was her thought. 'We shall neither of us want them. I wish they would go; they will spoil everything.'

Maggie's eyes sought Miss Simpson's face, and the governess seemed to read her thoughts.

'Now, my dears,' she said, turning to Laura and Juliet, 'I wish to say something. Jasmine Primrose is a very nice girl, and a very pretty one; but she is—to begin with, at least—Margaret's special friend. Suppose we ask other girls to the castle to-day. Suppose we ask your special friend, Laura.'

'My special friend?' said Laura. 'Well, of course, I am rather smitten with Lady Letitia Tewkesbury; but I don't suppose she could come.'

'And I have no special friend,' said Juliet.

'We might send an invitation to Lady Letitia. Nothing is easier,' said Miss Simpson. 'I will write a note immediately and send it by the groom; and as to you, Juliet, you may as well have little Lady Flora to keep you company.'

Juliet sighed, but acquiesced.

'I hope she won't cause me to spoil my new shoes,' she said. 'I hope she won't be the rompy sort. I want some one to walk about with and to play dolls with. I don't want the Maggie sort of girl.'

'Oh, you won't get her in the Tewkesburys!' laughed Miss Simpson. 'I never saw such absolutely conventional girls in the whole course of my life. But,' she added, 'they are very modish, and will take a high position in society.'

Poor Miss Simpson! She had her hands rather full that day. The Tewkesburys replied on scented, coroneted paper that they would be pleased to accept the invitation to spend the afternoon at Castle Mary, and Miss Simpson herself went off about two o'clock to fetch Jasmine. Maggie longed to accompany her, but that Miss Simpson tabooed.

'You cannot do it,' she said; 'I have a great deal to say to Jasmine before you meet.'

She did not tell her pupil what this was, but assuring her that she would quickly return, accompanied by Maggie's beloved friend, started off on her walk. It was, after all, for her footsteps that poor little Jasmine's heart was beating so hard. A few minutes passed; then there came the click of the latch of the little gate which opened on to the narrow path which led, again, to the front door. Jasmine recognised the governess. She had been expecting Maggie herself.

Her heart sank. Susan of the pockets and Jasmine met in the tiny hall.

'Oh,' said Jasmine, stepping back, 'I was going to open the door.'

'That is my place, Miss Jasmine,' said Susan.

She opened the front door a few inches and stood in a forbidding attitude before the visitor.

'My mistress is having her nap, and can't be disturbed.'

'But I have come,' said the governess, 'to see Miss Jasmine Primrose.'

'And here I am,' said Jasmine, pushing Susan aside and standing before the governess.

'May I come in?' said Miss Simpson.

'Now, listen you here, Miss Jasmine,' said Susan. 'You must make no noise with your visitor. Take her as quietly as you can into the parlour, and don't either of you let a pin fall, for if you do, missis will wake, and if missis wakes before the time—which is three by the clock—she will be good for nothing the rest of the day. You go along, both of you ladies, and keep the peace, that is all I have to say.'

Jasmine conducted Miss Simpson into the parlour.

'I have come,' she said. 'Everything was quite easy; no one suspected at the hill-top that I was doing anything wrong. You have come, but where is Maggie?'

'You are to come back with me at once to see her.'

Jasmine began to tremble.

'How can I?' she said. 'Mrs Blake is asleep.'

'You can leave her a note. She will not mind; she knows the Massereenes very well. Maggie is waiting for you. She wanted to come with me; but I had to see you first alone. There are several things I must say to you. A great deal depends on your discretion. I have gone through much to give you this treat—to give you your heart's desire. Can't you comprehend?'

'Indeed, indeed I can! I am grateful to you—more than grateful. I am wicked, very wicked; and you, in a way, are my tempter. But still, I am grateful to you—yes, grateful.'

'You extraordinary child!'

'I cannot go until Mrs Blake awakes. I am bad, but not as bad as that. I will tell her. You can go back. I cannot creep away while she is asleep. Bad as I am, I am not bad enough for that. I will come on later.'

'Come now,' said the governess; 'don't be silly. Go up and put on your things, and come with me immediately. It is only half-past two; she will not be awake for half-an-hour.'

'I cannot go, really, until she awakes.'

Jasmine tried to cling to the little straw of virtue which she felt was hers in refusing to

go to the Massereenes' without Mrs Blake's consent.

Mrs Blake stood for the time in the place of her father. She would not, of course, refuse her. Jasmine thought she would be comparatively happy if Mrs Blake said in a smiling voice, 'Go, of course, my love, and enjoy yourself.'

She sank down now on the chair, and said eagerly:

'I must wait for her consent.'

'You are silly,' said Miss Simpson; 'but if you must, you must. I cannot wait, for the Tewkesburys are coming—Lady Letitia and Lady Flora. Now, Jasmine, listen to me. You have but to walk down that road, take the first turn to your left, and you will find the gates. You will walk up the avenue, and I have no doubt Maggie will meet you before you reach the front door. When you and Maggie meet each other, surely no one need interfere. But, my dear child, part of your experiences this day will be, to say the least of it, a little difficult. For Mrs Massereene specially wishes to see you. Mrs Massereene knows nothing of the painful fact that your father has forbidden you to know her children; nor must you tell her. Keep as near the truth as you can; it is always best to keep close to the truth. But don't betray me. I gave her to understand that I saw your father yesterday.'

'You told her *that?*' said Jasmine.

'I gave her to understand. Don't question me too closely.'

Jasmine felt her cheeks grow crimson. There was an ugly, dull pain at her heart. She was doing very wrong indeed herself, but she felt that she despised Miss Simpson.

'What is the matter now?' said the governess. 'In what particular is my conduct worse than yours?'

'Oh, not a bit worse—not a bit worse,' said Jasmine, penitent on the spot. 'Only I was thinking for a minute how awfully, frightfully wicked we both are.'

'Thank you, Jasmine. Well, for the present at least, we must both go on being wicked. You dare not turn back now, or you would involve me. You would take my bread from me, no less. You could not be so cruel as to do that. When you see Mrs Massereene, you must act, my dear, with circumspection. You must give her to understand that by-and-by your father and the other girls will come here. I leave you to do it as best you can; but do it you must if you meet.'

'Oh! we had better not meet. I am afraid—afraid,' said Jasmine.

'Then you cannot come to the castle at all.'

'Not at all? Can I not see Maggie by herself?'

'No, not without that interview with Mrs Massereene.'

'Cannot Maggie come here?'

'On no account; it is not to be thought of.'

'Oh, what am I to do?' said Jasmine.

Miss Simpson was silent. She sat waiting. Jasmine fidgeted about the room. Her conscience talked:

'You are getting more wicked every minute; you are plunging deeper and deeper into downright sin. You know it quite well.' 'But Maggie—I want to see Maggie!' whispered Jasmine back. 'Even Maggie is not worth all this,' answered the voice. 'Think—think what it means.' 'I won't think,' answered Jasmine in an agony. 'Very well, take the consequences,' said conscience.

It ceased to speak. It seemed to go away somewhere, and Jasmine could not hear its voice. She turned her white, troubled face towards Miss Simpson.

'As I have gone so far, I will go the whole way,' she said. 'Leave me now. I will come up to the castle as soon as Mrs Blake awakes.'

Miss Simpson knew that from her point of view all was well. That ugly voice of conscience was silenced; the little girl would go down and down that path which led so far from all the hill-tops of duty. Jasmine felt very restless until presently she heard sounds in the drawing-room. These were caused by Susan, who, to the minute, at three o'clock, entered briskly, drew up the blinds, and presented her mistress, who had been lying asleep on the sofa, with a cup of the strongest,

most fragrant tea she could make for her. While the old lady was sipping her tea, and enjoying it, Jasmine came in.

'Ah, my love, I hope you have not been weary. Was *Peter Parley* agreeable, or did you play with Tiny in the garden? I only trust you won't have a very dull time with an old woman like myself. The day is so fine, however, that we might potter round the garden if you let me lean on your arm. Susan won't approve; she does not like my going out so late in the day; but nevertheless, in your company, and with the sun shining, it does seem quite a temptation.'

'A temptation?' interrupted Jasmine hastily. The words seemed to her to have a peculiar significance. 'Oh yes,' she added eagerly, 'and perhaps—another day—but'——

'What is it, my love?'

'I had very little time to read *Peter Parley's Annual.* While you were asleep I had a'—she paused for a minute—'visitor.'

'A visitor! Do you know any one here?'

'Only Maggie Massereene and her governess.'

'You know the Massereenes, then?'

'I know Maggie.'

'They are quite old friends of mine,' said Mrs Blake. 'Well, and who called on you?'

'The governess, Miss Simpson.'

'A nice little body,' said Mrs Blake; 'and, now that I recall it, she seemed interested in you. It

was she who suggested that you should come to me—not that you would not be welcome in any case. Well, and she called—what about?'

'She brought an invitation. The Massereenes want me to spend the rest of the day there. You don't mind—do you?'

'Why, of course not, my love. I shall be quite delighted. Young people must fraternise with young people, and if you know the family'—Jasmine made no reply—'and your father quite approves'—Jasmine was silent—'you may go.'

'Thank you so much,' said Jasmine, jumping up.

'Susan will fetch you to-night at nine. Are you asked to spend the entire day there?'

'Yes—oh yes.'

'Susan will fetch you at the hour I have named. Do not, on any account, keep her waiting. This is Saturday night, and she thinks a great deal of her Sundays. She goes to church four times; she really is a wonderfully religious woman is my dear Susan. She allows no cooking in the house on Sunday except just the boiling of the kettle for tea. You must be satisfied with cold viands, my darling. But that does not matter; get ready as soon as possible, and go to your friends. Enjoy yourself with them. I am very glad.'

Jasmine kissed little Mrs Blake, then went up to her room. Quickly was she dressed, and swiftly did she get over the road. When she found herself really inside the avenue, within the for-

bidden grounds, she felt a thrill at her heart; her conscience began to talk.

'Oh, how sorry you will be for this!' She answered at once and rudely, 'Keep quiet. I am not going to bother about you at present.'

Then she hurried up the avenue, trembling, eager, her heart going fast. On the terrace Maggie was standing alone. Her eager eyes were surveying the landscape. Suddenly they rested on Jasmine, and she gave a cry, made an eager movement. The next instant two little girls were flying to each other, two pairs of arms were flung round two necks. There were some kisses, even a tear or two, then silence. The large brown eyes of Maggie Massereene were looking into the dark-blue depths of Jasmine's eyes.

Maggie whispered:

'Oh, runcible girl, how I have missed you!'

And Jasmine said with a trembling sort of gasp:

'And I you—and I you!'

Then, arm-in-arm, too happy for speech, they wandered away into the depths of the shrubbery. They did not want to talk. Intensely happy people don't talk much. They were content to know that they were close together, that each could look at the beloved face of the other whenever she chose. For nearly half-an-hour they enjoyed themselves in this fashion, and conscience never spoke to either. The sun was shining overhead, and the sky was a perfect blue—the blue of early summer. In the

distance was heard the very thin, high voice of Lady Letitia Tewkesbury; and Jasmine, raising her eyes, saw four girls walking sedately two and two along a path which seemed to be skirted by a high brick wall.

'There they go in the sun,' said Maggie. 'I call them the conventions. They will only talk the most out-and-out rubbish. They don't know themselves what they want. They have not the faintest glimmer of understanding what true friendship means.'

'Who are they?' asked Jasmine.

'Who are they?' repeated Maggie. 'Don't you know anything, runcible girl? That tall one is my sister Laura; she thinks herself a beauty. The girl with her is Letitia Tewkesbury. That little one is my sister Juliet. The girl with her is Flora Tewkesbury. Those four heads contain four brains, but I don't think they have an idea amongst them. Well, let them be happy in their own way; come and sit in this bower with me, Jasmine. Oh, I am happy to have found you again!'

Jasmine made no answer; her feelings were almost beyond speech. They sat in the bower. They scarcely wanted to break the silence; their hearts were so full that they could not speak much. But that silence was broken for them, for Miss Simpson, dressed very prettily in mauve, appeared in view. She came up to the friends as they sat in their bower.

'I am glad you have come,' she said to Jasmine. Jasmine smiled. 'Mrs Massereene wants to see you.'

'Oh,' said Maggie, frowning, 'what does mother want now?'

'Just to have a little talk with your friend, Maggie. Will you go too?'

'Of course I will go too.'

'Then go, both of you, my dears, at once.—Jasmine, be exceedingly careful; remember you have others—or at least another—to consider.—I will meet you, my dears, at tea-time. Tea will be ready in the old library as soon as your interview with Mrs Massereene is over.—Maggie, bring your friend then straight to the library.'

Maggie nodded.

'What a bore this is!' she said as they walked to the house.

Jasmine did not reply. They entered the wide hall, and passed side by side up the low, very broad marble stairs. This marble had been brought from Carrara at an enormous expense by the late Mr Massereene. They passed down a wide corridor and entered a lobby curtained and carpeted—a lobby with a soft, luxurious appearance about it. Then Maggie turned to her companion. Jasmine had not noticed the marble stairs, or the wide corridor, or the great hall whose ceiling was the roof of the house itself; but as she stood in the hush of the little antechamber she felt her heart

beat, and a passionate desire for the hill-top and simplicity overpowered her.

'This is mother's room,' said Maggie. 'Come along quickly, and let us get it over.'

Then she opened the door and entered. Jasmine came swiftly behind her. Mrs Massereene was alone. She was very becomingly dressed, and she looked exceedingly elegant and young, and not in the least like Maggie. She fixed her somewhat sunken, somewhat peevish blue eyes on the face of the young girl whom she had so wanted to see.

'So you are Jasmine Primrose? Come over, my dear, and kiss me.'

Jasmine approached very unwillingly. She did not suppose that any one could look like Mrs Massereene—so young, and yet so old; so faded in one sense, so intensely, delicately perfumed and preserved in another. She did not want to kiss her or to touch her hand. But she had to clasp the hand, and she had to press her fresh young lips on the massaged brow.

'Now stand back a little,' said Mrs Massereene. 'Let me see you—oh, do face the light, child! Yes, you have a look—a little look of your father. Your father was my very great friend,' said Mrs Massereene. 'We used to be at one time all in all to each other. He told me his every secret. We met almost daily, and we shall meet again. I am so glad you are here; you will come often, won't you?'

Jasmine approached very unwillingly.

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'Thank you,' whispered Jasmine.

'She will be delighted to come, mother,' said Maggie.—Won't you, Jasmine?'

'Yes,' said Jasmine, glancing at Maggie, and some of the heaviness and unnaturalness which had so terribly oppressed her since she entered the room went out of her voice.

'My love, I am just delighted to see you,' said Mrs Massereene. 'Sit down; don't hurry away. Why, you will be quite a little charmer some day; there is not a doubt whatever of that. You will be pretty when you are properly dressed. What a quaint little frock!'

The tired, deep-set, and yet scornful eyes rested on poor Jasmine's brown holland.

'How quaint and refreshing! You are quite like one of the Fairchild family. What were their names? I forget.'

'Oh, Lucy and Emily.'

'Well, you are little Lucy. I think I shall call you Lucy. What fun!'

'Please, my name is Jasmine.'

'Ah, well, well,' said Mrs Massereene, 'and she takes offence when she is called little Lucy Fairchild. Well, we must humour her—we must, indeed; and we will, we will, certainly. Now, tell me about your father, Jasmine. Is he well?'

'He is very well.'

'When is he coming to see me?'

'I don't know.'

'My dear child, didn't he send me a message?'

Jasmine looked towards the door. She longed to escape.

'No—I mean—he can't come just yet.'

'Well, well,' said Mrs Massereene, 'of course he will come soon; and your sisters must come. But we have got you, and we mean to keep you; we mean to see a great deal of you.—Maggie, my love, I was saying to Miss Simpson only yesterday that your little friend Jasmine might be your constant companion. The summer is only beginning, and she might spend some months here.'

'Oh—I'—— burst from Jasmine. 'Of course I'd love beyond anything, but I just couldn't.'

'There is no "couldn't" when my will is law,' said Mrs Massereene. 'Your father and I will have a little talk, and, hey, presto! the thing will be arranged. Don't you fret your pretty little head over the matter. You will come here to stay, and our dear, cultured Miss Simpson will teach you. You will be Maggie's friend; you and Maggie can share the same room and share the same dresses, and be really sisters each to the other. It will be all arranged. Don't you look so puzzled, my dear. I am glad to see you for your father's sake.—Now, Maggie, you may take her away.—You will be with us most of the time while you are staying with dear Mrs Blake, and afterwards I will arrange with your father.'

'But, please—you must not!' burst from Jasmine.

'Must not?' Mrs Massereene looked surprised.

'You must never tell any one that I came to-day—please, please!'

'Excuse me, ladies,' said at this moment the precise voice of the masseuse, 'but it is time for my hand to come into requisition. If you, dear madam, will come into your bedroom, and if these ladies will withdraw, I shall be grateful.'

'You must hurry off, my dear,' said Mrs Massereene. 'This good woman is inexorable.—Yes, yes, Mrs Dallas, I will come—I will come; of course, of course.—Good-bye for to-day, then, dear little Jasmine; and remember that I will arrange matters. You will leave the thing absolutely in my hands.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A MINE IS LAID.

MAGGIE supposed, looking back afterwards on the course of events, that she did enjoy that day absolutely. The interview with Mrs Massereene over, everything else became comparatively easy. There was a delightful tea in the library. The room was cool but not cold. The sunlight flickered through the first delicate greenery of early summer. There was a perfect tea on the table—every sort of good thing.

Miss Simpson was not only in the best of spirits, but she was in the mood to make herself agreeable. No one could make herself more agreeable than Miss Simpson. Even the Tewkesbury girls, who were so exceedingly prim and proper, condescended to smile once or twice at the naïve remarks of the governess. They scarcely noticed Jasmine, who was introduced to them with much ceremony. They looked with contempt at Maggie; but when Miss Simpson catechised Lady Letitia, and gently suggested that Lady Flora might indulge in one tiny piece more of the rich plum-cake, the ladies in question felt that they liked her very much. It was part of the

home discipline that the Lady Letitia and the Lady Flora were not to overeat themselves. Their mother belonged to the old school, and she prescribed such restricted diet that it had been known in the darkest of the dark annals of the house that Lady Flora had slipped downstairs in the middle of the night to secure some extra refreshment for herself and Lady Letitia. Had such a deed of darkness got abroad, woe betide the poor sisters!

They were anæmic, quiet, terribly prim girls, without a trace of good looks, but with the aristocratic air which was thought more of by the Countess of Ilchester than any mere beauty. Their slender white hands had never done a useful thing in the course of their lives. Their small, thin voices had never risen to the pitch of heroism or even enthusiasm. Their dull blue eyes had never caught the fire of purpose or the spark of ambition. They were what they were: trained by an old-fashioned governess, brought up by an old-fashioned mother—their narrow lives lived in a groove.

Laura and Juliet were fairly agreeable companions to these young people, but if they could have had a strong private opinion on any given subject, they would have thought Maggie and Jasmine black sheep.

The meal came to an end; the girls went out and played games. The games were dull and

frivolous. Jasmine proposed that they should run races. Maggie applauded this idea; the other four demurred. In the end the friends were left alone.

'Let them go,' said Maggie; 'they are four sticks. How different you are, Jasmine! How glad I am that I have found you!'

Jasmine smiled and sighed.

'If,' she said at last slowly, 'I were not the most unhappy girl in the world, I should be the happiest.'

'But why are you so unhappy?'

'You know—of course you know, Maggie. I have done this in spite of father; I sha'n't sleep to-night, thinking of what father will say.'

Maggie looked at her anxiously.

'I could not give you up now,' she said.

'Nor I you,' said Jasmine.

'I'd go through fire and water for you,' said Maggie.

'And I for you,' said Jasmine.

Maggie came close to Jasmine. She put her arm round her companion's waist.

'Have you ever worn the little chain and locket I left you?' she said.

'I am wearing it now,' said Jasmine. She touched her neck as she spoke.

'But wear it so that others may see. Are you ashamed of it?'

'I was afraid to show it at home, but I will wear it now,' said the girl.

She slipped it outside her brown holland blouse. The diamonds sparkled against her throat; the narrow gold chain made a line of light.

Nine o'clock came all too soon.

'We will meet to-morrow,' said Maggie.

'Yes,' said Jasmine, 'we will meet to-morrow.' She did not know how.

'We all go to church in the morning,' continued Maggie, looking at her companion. 'I will call in after church. I will talk to Mrs Blake. I know her quite well. She will be delighted to let you spend the rest of the day at the castle. Oh! Sunday is such a dull day, as a rule; but thus it will go on wings. Expect me after church.'

'Yes,' said Jasmine. She felt that she was drifting. She had no longer any principles to guide her own little barque of life. As she walked back by Susan's side even her conscience ceased to trouble her.

'Well,' said she of the pockets, 'and so you are going to be much with the fine folks here. I doubt me much if your good father would like that sort of company.'

Jasmine found it impossible to make any reply.

'How is Mrs Blake?' she said after a pause.

'Well, she is none the better for having you

with her. I thought, maybe, as you would entertain her a bit and cheer her up, like; but that ain't you. If you're going to spend all your time with your gay friends, why should I have the trouble of getting your room ready, and all that sort of thing?'

'We must have fun when we are young,' said Jasmine. 'Don't scold, please, Susan. I thought you would be my friend.'

'Well, and ain't I,' said Susan, 'trapezing along the roads all this way to fetch you, and on the eve of the Sabbath? Now, let's hurry up; I have to be at my church at eight to-morrow morning, and to get the house shipshape first.'

'Shall I get up very, very early and help you, Susan? I will, if you like.'

'Can you brush a room?' said Susan.

'I think so.'

'Well then, I will call you at half-past five. You can go down along o' me and help me with the dining-room and drawing-room. But you must do it quiet, and be sure not to leave a speck of dirt anywhere, and yet not a sound to wake my missis. Then you can take the missis up her cup of tea. My word! you might help me if you liked. You must have a deal to do at the hill-top; for Betty can't manage all that big house without some of you taking a hand's-turn to assist her.'

'I will get up early,' said Jasmine. 'I will do everything in the world that I can.'

'That is a good child. I have got some almond-comfits in a tin box in the kitchen, and you shall have some to-morrow. You used to be so keen-set on them when you were a young un.'

'Yes,' said Jasmine, 'so I was.'

But she felt that her taste for almond-comfits had left her. She was depressed. The friendship with Maggie was delightful, but not all-satisfying. Her conscience was not talking to her, and yet she felt in low spirits.

Sunday turned out a beautiful day. Jasmine got up with the lark, and helped Susan so thoroughly that the good old body was quite pleased.

At breakfast Mrs Blake, who wore her Sunday black satin of the richest and softest material, looked quite a picture. She had a little white lace cap on her head, and a soft white muslin fichu round her shoulders. She was in love with the day, and rubbing her old hands together, said, 'What a good—what a very good thing it is, my child, to be alive—to be alive in God's beautiful world! Isn't He good to us, Jasmine? Ah, my dear, you must come to my years to understand how good—to understand how beautiful—He is.'

Jasmine stirred restlessly. On another occasion she would have loved this talk, she would

have appreciated old Mrs Blake's words, but not to-day.

'My dear,' said Mrs Blake, 'I am an old woman. I have long passed my threescore years and ten. If I live to the end of this year I shall be eighty, my love. Eighty is a great age —great to have lived to, great to look back upon. All the years of my pilgrimage I have been sustained by the everlasting arms. As the hills are round about Jerusalem, so has the Lord been round about me, compassing me in all my ways. Jasmine, I often think of you and your sisters on your hill-top, and I feel, somehow, that you must be nearer to God up there than we are down here. Not that it matters where we are if the Divine Presence is close to us; but the hill-top must cause aspirations to rise. I consider you, my love, a most lucky child.'

'Yes, I am,' said Jasmine, pouring herself out a cup of tea as she spoke.

'I had a letter from your father a couple of days ago, my dear, and he tells me that his plans for the winter are altered, and that he is going from the society of that beautiful home of his into the bustle of the busiest place in the world. It will be a great change for you, and I shall miss you. Your father comes to see me once in every two or three months; even that slight intercourse is very precious to me. I shall miss you all much.'

'But we are coming back again in the summer,' said Jasmine.

'Ah, yes, dear, I know that; but you will never be the same again.'

'Why not?'

'You will have got the world into your hearts; you won't like the hill-top any more.'

Jasmine felt a queer lump in her throat.

Mrs Blake said, after a pause, 'You will see your father and sisters at church this morning.'

'Yes.'

'I should like your father to call on me. I have written him a little note. Will you give it to him?'

'Aren't you coming to church, Mrs Blake?'

'No, dear. I am well, but of late I have not been quite strong enough for church. Here is a note; put it into his hand, my love. He will visit me before he climbs the hill. I have just a word or two to say to him.'

Jasmine took the note. Presently she went up to her room. The fact that she was to give the note to her father was exceedingly disturbing to her. She knew that she should see her sisters and father in church. Their invariable habit was to walk down to the church, and the very moment the service was over to retrace their steps to the hill-top. The family of the Primroses never on Sunday lingered a moment longer than they could help in the plain. But now, if she

gave the note to her father, he would certainly call to see Mrs Blake. Violet and Daisy would, as a matter of course, accompany him; and, in short, the Primrose family would be congregated at Mrs Blake's cottage just at the very moment when Maggie Massereene was about to call for Jasmine.

'I dare not give the note!' thought the girl. 'Oh dear, what is going to happen? I am plunging deeper and deeper into every sort of wickedness. How will it end?'

She slipped the note into her pocket; then she took it out again; finally, she decided to leave it behind. She would tell Mrs Blake that she had forgotten it. Mrs Blake could write to her father. Mrs Blake might be disappointed and annoyed; but anything was better than that she should deliver the note on this special Sunday afternoon. She wished now most heartily that she had forbidden Maggie to call for her, but such a contingency as had arisen could not possibly have occurred to her.

She went to church with her thoughts in a whirl. Susan accompanied her.

'What a beautiful day it is!' Susan said. 'My missis will sit with the Holy Book before her and meditate on her God in the cottage while I pray to Him in the church. What should we do without our Sundays, Miss Jasmine?'

Jasmine said nothing. They entered the little

church. It was a very old one, belonging to the early Norman period; but it had been, of course, renovated, and there were now the ordinary pews, a quite modern chancel, and a fine organ. The organ had been the gift of the late Mr Massereene, and the chancel had also been built by him. He was a man who in his day had done magnificent things, and the restoration of the old church at the time when Castle Mary was rebuilt was one of those deeds which would be remembered as long as the church lasted.

The clergyman who officiated was a good preacher and a fine reader. The choir wore surplices, and the whole service was excellent and most reverently conducted.

Jasmine went up to the pew where her family sat. They were all there before her. The service had just begun before the Massereenes appeared. Their pew was quite to the front. The three girls, the governess, and even Mrs Massereene herself were present. Jasmine was rather surprised to see her. She glanced round at Jasmine as they were walking up the aisle. Her faded eyes darted past the girl to the bowed head of the Professor; but he was kneeling in prayer at the moment, and never even observed her.

When the service had come to an end, Violet asked Jasmine when she was returning.

'I don't know,' said Jasmine; 'perhaps not quite yet.'

The Massereenes passed out of the church; Jasmine, her father, and sisters followed. Jasmine felt a sense of relief when she noticed that her friends did not linger in the porch.

'Will you come back to-morrow?' asked Violet.

'I don't know; perhaps not—if you don't want me.'

'Oh, my child,' said her father, 'stay as long as you like; if Mrs Blake wishes you, stay on until Wednesday or Thursday. You are looking better already. Enjoy yourself on the plain.—And now, Violet, we must hasten home.—Give my love to Mrs Blake, Jasmine. I hope to call to see her before very long.'

'Yes, father,' said Jasmine. She felt guilty and miserable. She wondered how it was that her father and sisters could think her better. At that moment she would have given anything in the world to be back again on the hill-top. Even the friendship of Maggie seemed scarcely worth the pain it cost.

When she reached the little cottage Mrs Blake was standing on the threshold.

'Well,' she said eagerly, 'where is he?'

'I am so terribly sorry,' said Jasmine; 'I forgot to take him the note.'

'You forgot!' said Mrs Blake.

'Yes; I fumbled in my pocket, but it was not there. I must have left it in my bedroom.'

'My dear Jasmine!'

The old lady looked really annoyed.

'I wanted to see him on a special matter,' she said. 'But could not you have told him that I had written him a note? He would have come then.'

'I did not think of that,' said Jasmine.

She stood looking very penitent, her eyes cast down. Just then a gay, bustling voice was heard behind her, and Miss Simpson, accompanied by Maggie Massereene and Laura, appeared at the little gateway.

'Come in, come in, all of you!' said Mrs Blake in her most cordial tone.

'Oh, Mrs Blake,' said Miss Simpson, 'we have come to fetch Jasmine. May she come to the castle to spend the day?'

'I should like to,' said Jasmine.

'Do you want her now, this very minute?' said Mrs Blake.

She looked keenly from the eager face of Maggie Massereene to the equally eager one of Jasmine Primrose. Jasmine felt that she ought not to go. She was on a visit to the old lady, and had given the latter practically none of her time; but she wanted Maggie; she hated to be away from her.

'You shall choose yourself, Jasmine,' said Mrs Blake. 'I do not wish to part you from your friends. What a pity your dear father is not here! I am interested in his allowing you to

know my dear friends the Massereenes; for I thought his scheme was to prohibit all outside friendship until his girls came to years of discretion. However, as it is his wish, I have nothing to say. Go, by all means, Jasmine. But come back in good time, dear; for Susan, after being four times to church, will be a little tired this evening.'

'We will bring her back ourselves,' said Miss Simpson.

A few minutes later Jasmine started for Castle Mary. She and Maggie walked side by side. All was delightful. How well things were turning out! How little wrong it was, after all, to conceal a letter, to tell a few lies to deceive those whom she loved best! What a fuss people made about right and wrong! She was doing wrong, and nobody was any the wiser. She was with Maggie, and she was happy.

Mrs Blake sat down to her lonely dinner. It was scarcely lonely to her, for she was accustomed to self-communings and to long days by herself. She ate her cold chicken and sipped her tea, and presently went into the drawing-room. She was feeling specially weak and tired that day, and a little lonely too. She would have enjoyed the companionship of her young friend. She had wanted to see Mr Primrose on several matters. He was her greatest friend in these parts; he had been her friend since he, at least, was young.

In a certain sense he was her man of business. She was anxious for a small alteration to be made in her will, about which she wished to consult him. She sat down in an easy-chair near the fire. It was a glorious summer day in June. As she sat her thoughts were very busy. She was thinking a great deal about Jasmine, and also about the Massereenes. She was friendly with the Massereenes. She had known Mr Massereene—an excellent, self-made man who had amassed untold gold, and had spent it on the whole worthily. He had given of his substance to the poor and needy, he had restored the old church, and he had left his family enormously wealthy. Mrs Massereene was, Mrs Blake considered, a poor thing; she had not her husband's character; she was vain and rather silly. Her daughters took after her, except, indeed, Maggie, who had her father's eyes, and a sort of wild, free expression in her face.

Mrs Blake had not the faintest idea that Mr Primrose had any reason to dislike the Massereenes. She did not know that he had had an acquaintanceship with the family in the olden days. But somehow—she could not tell why—she scarcely cared for a great intimacy between Jasmine Primrose and the family at Castle Mary. She thought and thought. It was the governess—a rather silly little woman—who had suggested to her to have Jasmine on a visit. Jasmine had come. Right

welcome had the child been—the dear child whom she had known from her birth—the dear motherless girl who had been brought up so quaintly, so tenderly, by her father! But since Jasmine came the Massereenes had taken notice of her. She was with them almost the whole of yesterday; she was practically spending Sunday with them. And Jasmine herself was changed. She seemed fairly well, certainly; but, at the same time, the old eyes detected something wrong in those bright, sweet, youthful eyes of the girl. There was a veiled look about them. There was also a latent anxiety. Then why—oh, why—had Jasmine forgotten the letter?

Mrs Blake became anxious, she did not know why. She began to wonder—as the old do wonder—could there by any possibility be anything wrong? She loved the Primroses as she loved no other people in the world. They on their hill-top and she on her plain were actuated by the same motives. They would serve God in their generation. Somehow she did not think that the Massereenes were the best friends for Jasmine. Even Maggie was not altogether to her mind. As to the other two girls—they were so colourless, so vain, so silly, that the strong-minded old lady very nearly despised them.

'I wish, at least, that Jasmine had delivered my letter,' she said to herself. 'But there, I can send a line to-night by the post. My old friend

will come to see me in the morning. There is no one more quick to obey a summons than Hector Primrose; he will not fail me if I write to him.'

So, while Jasmine was happily enjoying herself, and not in the least apprehending storms ahead; while she and Maggie were making plans to meet daily during her visit to Mrs Blake, a mine was being sprung under the young girl's feet; for Mrs Blake wrote as follows to Mr Primrose:

'My dear Friend,—Youth is always forgetful, and I am the last to complain. I wrote you a little note this morning, which I asked your daughter Jasmine to deliver to you after church. The child forgot the note. It is quite excusable. If, my dear friend, you, within the next day or two, can find your way down to the plain and will favour me with a call, I shall be immensely obliged. There is a small business matter I want to consult you about.—Your affectionate old friend, Matilda Blake.

'*P.S.*—Jasmine looks, on the whole, well, and is, I think, happy. She is a good deal with the Massereenes. Maggie Massereene seems quite a nice girl.'

This letter was posted long before Maggie returned from Castle Mary. She knew nothing about it, nor did Mrs Blake mention it to her.

But even if Mrs Blake had not written, a bomb-shell would have awakened the quietness and peace of the hill-top on the following morning. For Mrs Massereene had herself taken the bit between her teeth. Notwithstanding the fact that the governess had, as she hoped, mystified the good lady, and notwithstanding the fact that Jasmine had implored Mrs Massereene to say nothing to her father, she determined to write to him. She had an excuse. She had a reason. Was not his own daughter in the house? Was he not her old friend? She therefore found pen and paper and wrote as follows:

'DEAR PROFESSOR,—I should like to call you by your old name, but such a lapse of years has divided us that I scarcely dare to take the liberty. Nevertheless, I have had the great pleasure of seeing your beloved child. She and my Maggie are sworn friends, and are at the present moment enjoying themselves together. Your Jasmine is one to be proud of, and I think you will agree with me that my Maggie is a fine creature. They are devoted to each other. Their friendship is quite remarkable. It reminds me of that beautiful friendship in the Bible between David and Jonathan. Each child can do the other a great deal of good. Oh, my dear, eccentric friend! you choose to live on the hill-top; nevertheless, I think you will find that your dear little Jasmine prefers the

plain. I am most anxious to see you again, and I trust that although you were not able to fix a day when my dear friend and governess, Miss Simpson, called on you, yet that you will speedily find a leisure moment to visit me, and that you will bring your other two sweet young flowerets with you. It was so romantic, and like you, my good Professor, to call your children after the flowers. May they always remain as innocent and beautiful and fragrant as the flowers of the field!

'You will see, my dear friend, that although I am much older in years, I have still the romantic disposition which characterised me of old. Since my dear husband's death I have been a lonely woman, with the care of three sweet, young blossoms myself to cultivate and prepare for the future. My Maggie, the only one you have seen, is, unlike the others, less beautiful, but, I think, in some ways possesses more spirit. She is a fine creature, although she needs discipline. I never saw her so well and so happy as since she met your child.

'And now, this is my proposal: will you give me your girl to live with us during the summer months, to be Maggie's constant companion, to share her lessons with my esteemed and most cultivated friend Miss Simpson, to have the advantage of the masters who come two or three times a week from Preston to teach my Margaret

music and painting? Your child shall, in all respects, be treated as my child; and if, in addition, you will allow her sisters to visit her once or twice a week I shall be a happy woman. Thus the hill-top and the plain may virtually meet, and the old times may be renewed.—Believe me, my dear friend, yours, with the old affection,

'ALICIA MASSEREENE.'

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

THE TEST OF FRIENDSHIP.

MR PRIMROSE had made a special arrangement about the post. He had a box securely fastened to one of the pine-trees, into which his letters were dropped. It was the special work of one of the girls to run down early in the morning to open the box and bring up the letters. The postman called again at three o'clock in the afternoon for the post that was waiting for him in the box, the postman and Mr Primrose each keeping a key.

Mr Primrose's post was of that kind which no one would be likely to steal. Nevertheless, as he was a scholar, he often received proofs and even manuscripts. The fetching of the letters and the taking of the letters down to be posted were some of the special events in the Primrose day. On this occasion it was Violet who ran down to fetch the letters. There were three or four that morn-

ing: one from Lord Dunbar, another from a Paternoster Row publisher, and two from the plain. Violet did not trouble herself much about them. She carried them up the hill, springing up the steep incline with the buoyant step of youth.

Her father liked to have his letters on his plate at breakfast-time, and as a rule she and her sisters never disappointed him.

Daisy had made the tea by the time Violet returned. The Professor was also in the room.

'It is such a hot morning,' said Violet as she came in; 'and here are your letters, padre; not a very big post this morning.'

She handed them to him as she spoke. He put them beside his plate. The Professor looked particularly well this morning. He ate a good breakfast. He praised the day. He wondered how Jasmine could stand the sultry air of the plain. He rejoiced in his hill-top, and in the pure air which blew there.

Breakfast was nearly at an end, and the girls were about to leave the room when he opened the first letter. Just as he was doing so he said:

'I shall be ready for you both in my study in half-an-hour. Don't keep me waiting, either of you, for I have a great deal to do this morning. I see that Staunton has sent my proofs of the last sheet of my compilation. It will need most careful revision, and as I must return it to

him by the afternoon post I shall be exceedingly busy.'

'All right, father, we will be quite punctual,' said Violet in her pleasant voice; and she and Daisy left the room.

Mr Primrose had now opened Mrs Blake's letter. He read the contents at first calmly, half-smiling to himself, saying in his heart:

'I will go to see the dear old woman to-morrow, certainly—certainly not later than to-morrow.' Then there came a frown between his brows. He took off his glasses, wiped them, and put them on again. There was an eager expression now on his face, a puzzled look, which gradually changed to one of pain, dismay, even horror. The Professor was, however, a man of great self-control, and he did not utter a word. When he had quite taken in all the contents of the letter he said to himself:

'I am exceedingly glad that Violet and Daisy are not in the room.'

He then opened the envelope of the second letter, that written by Mrs Massereene. Years had changed her handwriting, and he had not at first recognised it. He shivered slightly as he read her words. Her letter was a confirmation of Mrs Blake's, revealing much that Mrs Blake had left hidden. By the time he had finished the second letter the whole of the conspiracy was made plain to him. His own child had de-

liberately disobeyed him. She had done that which he had particularly desired her not to do, and she had effected her object by a course of deceit which almost paralysed him.

The Professor was a very good man. His moral code was exceedingly high. After his wife's death he had thought out a scheme for the bringing up of his little motherless girls, and he had firmly believed that that scheme had succeeded. It had not succeeded. As far as Jasmine was concerned, it had failed undoubtedly. He knew now, as a sword rent his heart, that of all his children she was his favourite; that, much as he cared for the others, he cared for her the most. Her mother had died at her birth. Jasmine had been specially given to him to bring up, to cherish, to care for. Some day he had hoped to give her back to her mother a beautiful soul, trained in all that was virtuous and noble. But now——

He snatched up his hat. This was a sort of thing which could not be thought of within the four walls of the cottage. It needed the outside air—the hill-top, where he might be alone. His first intuition, however, was to conceal all knowledge of the truth from the other girls. Violet was in the garden. She was bending over a bed of early mignonette. She was removing some weeds and carefully tending the young plants.

'My post requires me at once,' called the

Professor. 'I shall not be able to give you any lessons this morning. You and Daisy, therefore, had best occupy yourselves in other ways. I shall not be back, either, for early dinner, as I must visit the plain.'

'Oh, are you going to Mrs Blake's,' called out Daisy, 'and will you take something for Jasmine?'

'I cannot wait,' said the Professor; 'you must send anything you wish to your sister another time.'

He felt he could not utter Jasmine's name. He hurried off. The two girls watched him.

'Can anything be the matter?' said Violet.

'There is something the matter,' remarked the other.

The season was very hot, and the Professor walked fast. When he entered the shade of the pine-wood he felt a sense of bodily relief; but that relief mattered nothing, for it did not touch his spirit. The soul of the man was in agony. He was blaming himself as much as Jasmine. He was wondering what he could do. Severe measures would, in one sense, be useless, and yet some measures must be adopted to bring the girl's wrong-doing home to her—so thoroughly home to her that she would never forget it to the latest day of her life.

In the middle of the pine-wood he found a fallen tree. It would be removed soon, of course,

but in its present position it formed a seat. He sat down on it, took off his hat and laid it on the ground, and remained for a long time lost in thought. Once or twice a smile which was almost grim crossed his face. Then he put on his hat again with energy and renewed his walk. It was quite evident that he had made up his mind. When he reached the plain all semblance of wind dropped. There was an absolute calm, and the Professor felt tired, as he always did in the low lands.

He walked past Mrs Blake's cottage. Jasmine was within. She had not the faintest idea that her father was anywhere except on the hill-top. Jasmine was very busy helping Mrs Blake to label and tie up some pots of fresh preserve which Susan had just made. She was wearing a white frilled apron, and was enjoying herself. She was to spend the afternoon at Castle Mary. Her conscience had been so rudely rebuffed that by this time it was almost silent. She felt comfortable and nearly happy. She was praising Maggie in no measured terms to Mrs Blake.

'Oh, she is so splendid,' Jasmine was saying, 'and I love her so dearly!'

Mrs Blake answered:

'If she is splendid she must be different from the others.'

'But I thought you liked the Massereenes,' said Jasmine.

'As acquaintances, yes. I should never make them my friends.'

'That is because you don't know Maggie. Maggie has a great heart.'

'You are not tying that pot securely enough,' said Mrs Blake. 'When I was a young girl I always did one thing at a time.'

'But I am only doing this thing.'

'Not at all; you are thinking of Maggie Massereene. You cannot tie my jam properly when your thoughts are absorbed by her.'

Jasmine laughed, and tried to become absorbed in her work. She little knew what was about to take place not far away from where she was now sitting.

The Professor, having passed Mrs Blake's house without once glancing at it or attempting to go in, presently found the gates which led to the castle. A few days ago he had paused at these gates to bid Maggie Massereene good-bye. He had imagined then that he had told her as plainly as girl could be told the real state of the case. He did not wish for a friendship between the families. Any girl who had a spark of honour in her composition would have understood. He hardly thought of Maggie now, however; all his thoughts were devoted to Jasmine. She was his; she belonged to him. He recalled a scene of long ago: the woman whom he had alone truly loved giving him her dying message; the hand so weak

and tremulous, with the dews of death already on the fine fingers, slightly touched the baby's head; the voice so weak murmured blessings on the little life which had come into the world at the sacrifice of her own. The dying wife had spoken earnestly to the listening husband, and the husband had promised—oh, how faithfully he had promised! —to bring the child with him when he met his wife again. He recalled these things now, and quickened his steps.

Long as Professor Primrose had lived on the hill-top, he had seldom seen Castle Mary. Now he gazed steadily at the great house. With its castellated towers and all its signs of wealth, it seemed conventional and painfully new to him. Even the grounds, laid out in parterres and terraces and great beds of brilliant flowers, were not to his taste. All that was primeval had left the castle, and all that was artificial pertained to it.

He reached the front door and rang the ponderous bell. A footman answered his summons. He asked at once if Mrs Massereene was within.

'My mistress does not see visitors at this hour,' was the man's reply.

'Take your mistress my card,' said the Professor, 'and say that I will await her convenience.'

He took a card from his vest pocket and gave it to the servant. The man ushered him imme-

diately into a little room which opened out of the hall, and there the Professor waited. The servant took the card, and gave it to another servant, who in his turn gave it to a housemaid; the housemaid conveyed it to Mrs Massereene's maid, and so eventually it reached that good woman herself.

This was Monday—a great day for her. On Monday she was to be emancipated from Mrs Dallas's most rigorous treatment. A large party of very gay friends were expected. She would go down to dinner; she would wear her pretty toilet; she would talk to her favoured guests; she would enjoy herself. Already the wily ex-doctor assured her that she looked five years younger than before the treatment had begun. In reality, the poor woman looked haggard, pale, and worn. She was lying now on her bed, undergoing that massage which was to give her back her lost youth, when Professor Primrose's card was put into her hands. She looked at it, started, coloured, and sat up.

'Mrs Dallas, I must see this gentleman.'

'But, my dear madam, I am in the middle of my treatment. Surely it is not possible.'

'It *is* possible; it must be done.—Lucille, you will dress me immediately.—Mrs Dallas, I can have massage later on; no more now.—Please, take a message from me to the Professor to say that I will receive him in my boudoir in a quarter of an

hour. Then, Lucille, come back as fast as ever you can.—The Professor is a very old friend, Mrs Dallas; he is an exceedingly kind person, and I must on no possible account refuse him admission.'

'Very well, madam,' said the masseuse; 'but you will repent of this when you are very tired to-night.'

'I must see the Professor,' said Mrs Massereene.

Mrs Dallas left the room. Lucille, having delivered her message, returned, and Mrs Massereene made the best toilet possible under the circumstances. In less than the time specified she was lying, robed in a pale rose-coloured costume, on her sofa.

'Give me my glass, that I may see exactly how I look,' she said to Lucille.

Lucille did so. She did not admire her mistress that day. In her heart of hearts she thought massage very bad for the good lady.

'You will do quite well, madam,' she was inclined to say; 'and he is an old gentleman—quite old.'

'Well, draw down the blinds, and bring him upstairs, Lucille.'

Lucille went away at once. Mrs Massereene covered her face with her hands. She was trembling; her thoughts were in the past. There was no one in all the world she was more anxious to see than Professor Primrose; and yet there was no one she dreaded so much to see.

His firm step was heard in the antechamber; the door was opened, and he entered. He himself closed the door behind him, and then, coming forward, he bowed to Mrs Massereene and stood before her.

'Won't you sit down?' she said. 'Are you as angry as ever?'

'Between you and me,' he said, 'there can never be any friendship, and I earnestly beg of you, Mrs Massereene, to allow the subject to pass out of sight. I have come to you on another matter —your letter.'

He put his hand on a chair which stood near.

'At least have the goodness to seat yourself,' she said.

She felt intensely angry, and a spot of colour blazed on her cheek. The Professor did drop into a chair.

'I never wished to see you again,' he said, 'and my desire was, as I think I showed only too plainly, not to have any intercourse between your children and my children. That which occurred in the past, and which we both agreed not to speak of, stands as a wall between my friendship for you and your friendship for me.'

'Then why have you come?' she said. 'I did not know you were of such a relentless and unforgiving disposition. I was sorely tempted that time, and I know I acted dis—dishonourably. But surely it is only righteous to forgive.'

'In one sense I have forgiven, in another not. You and I are as the poles apart. But we won't talk of this any more. I insist on reticence. I have come to you to-day most unwillingly and on quite another matter.'

'What is that?' she asked.

She took out her handkerchief and wiped the moisture from her forehead.

'The subject of your letter.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Massereene, with a laugh, 'my little girl and your little girl! They have no enmity; they are friends.'

'Mrs Massereene, your letter has distressed me more than words can say. I must now explain things as briefly as possible. I must take you into my counsel, madam, and beg of you to help me. Both your child and my child have been guilty of grave acts of deceit and dishonour.'

'Oh no—no!' said Mrs Massereene.

'I repeat that they have, and, as I implicate my child as well as yours, I feel that I must speak freely. By the merest accident your daughter found her way to my lonely cottage a few days ago. She met my child in the wood near by. They took to each other, as girls will. Your child spent the day with us, and in the evening I conducted her to the gates of your home. On the way back I explained to her that there were reasons which I could not divulge—but nevertheless grave reasons—why she was on no account what-

ever to have anything in future to do with my children. She and they were to be as total strangers. I spoke, as I thought, kindly, and I imagined that she, as an honourable girl, understood and would obey. Your friend and mine, Lord Dunbar, called to see me a day or two later, and argued exhaustively with me on the subject. But my resolution was firm; there was to be no intimacy between the girls. He himself spoke to Jasmine, and I thought all was understood. I was quite well aware of the fact that my little Jasmine suffered. She is impulsive, and has, I grieve to say, far more of the spirit of discontent within her than her sisters possess.

'She received an invitation from an old friend of mine—Mrs Blake. I gave her leave to go. I trusted her fully. But, lo and behold! what has occurred? The whole thing was a scheme—a plan. Jasmine was to visit the plain solely for the object of coming here. She was to meet your child; she was to become acquainted with all your children. The intimacy which I forbade was to increase hour by hour.

'I received two letters this morning—one from you and one from Mrs Blake. I have not the slightest doubt that it is my daughter's intention to spend part of to-day here; for aught I know she may even now be here.'

'She is coming this afternoon,' said Mrs Massereene.

'And you, madam,' continued the Professor, 'knowing everything, knowing my reasons, have had the effrontery—for I can call it by no other name—to ask my permission to give my daughter a home here for the entire summer! You coolly propose to take her from me—her father—and to bring her up with your own daughters! There are indeed no limits to the brazen assurance of some folks, but I think this beats anything I have ever heard.'

Mrs Massereene covered her face, and after a minute she began to sob.

'You are very unkind; you are very hard.'

'I am deeply hurt,' said the Professor.

'What is to be done now?' said Mrs Massereene. 'I suppose you will tell the children, all of them, what I, their mother, did in the past, and which you, cruel man, will never forgive. Thus you will ruin my life and theirs, and yet with it all you can never kill the friendship between my Maggie and your Jasmine.'

'No; you mistake me,' said the Professor. 'It is very far from my intention to do anything to injure you with your children. The past is dead; all I want is that it should not be revived. My punishment of Jasmine is in its way unique. I have thought it all out. I cannot carry this punishment through without your aid; therefore I have come to you. Will you listen while I speak?'

Mrs Massereene stopped crying. She sat up on her sofa and looked full at the Professor.

'Oh, I will listen,' she said. 'I will do anything; you used to be so kind to me long ago.'

He hardly glanced at her. His eyes sought the ground.

'It had been my intention,' he said, 'to take my girls to London, and to show them the world myself. But Jasmine, who has always been different from her sisters, requires different treatment. I know of a school where I should like her to go, and I particularly want to know if you will allow your daughter Margaret to accompany her. If you agree to this, I will go immediately to Howgate Manor, and make arrangements for the girls' reception there. Mrs Howgate happens to be an old friend of mine. I respect her very much. She is a trifle old-fashioned, but believe me, Mrs Massereene, we need some of the old fashions in these terribly new-fashioned days; and I do not think the discipline—perhaps you would call it severity—of the school will injure either of the young people. If through sin on both their parts they have fought for this friendship, let them test it at Howgate Manor. Do you consent?'

'But how wonderful!' said Mrs Massereene. 'I have been for a long time wanting to send Maggie to that school; I have always felt that she needed

discipline; and dear Mrs Howgate is so original and so firm in her conduct. And you will let them go together—my girl and yours?'

'Yes,' said the Professor very sadly. 'They love each other; they must not be parted.'

He rose as he spoke.

'You will not go yet?'

'I must; I have much to attend to.'

'Will you see Maggie and tell her, or shall I?'

'Say nothing, please, Mrs Massereene, until you hear from me. I am going to take the next train into Yorkshire, and will visit Howgate Manor to-morrow morning at the farthest. I will send you a telegram from there; if the matter can be arranged quickly, the girls can go to the school within a week.'

'And in the meantime?' said Mrs Massereene.

'Say nothing; allow them to enjoy themselves. When all is settled you can speak to your daughter, and I will speak to mine.'

The Professor left the room. Mrs Massereene felt so troubled that she could scarcely eat any lunch. Her secret, which she was determined to keep, weighed upon her. She wanted to drop hints about it; she wanted to see Maggie; above all things, she wanted to talk to Miss Simpson. Miss Simpson must have told her a good many untruths. If Miss Simpson was the sort of person who told lies, she was truly not a fit teacher for the girls committed to her care. Mrs Massereene was so

disturbed that her masseuse was alarmed about her. She prescribed absolute rest during the afternoon, and forbade any one to enter the room.

Meanwhile the Professor, having sent a note to Violet by a special messenger, took the next train right away, as he expressed it, into the world. It was years and years ago since he had left the hill-top before. He was unaccustomed to travelling and unaccustomed to the ways of his fellow-men. He made a somewhat peculiar, though distinguished, figure. The expression of his face was singularly aloof and lofty. But when he gave his rare smile it was as though an angel were blessing some one. He had taken the pain and sorrow of this morning to One who alone could help, and believed himself guided in his present course of action.

That night he slept at a little inn in the heart of Yorkshire, and early the following morning took a long drive to Howgate Manor. There are many beautiful parts of Yorkshire, but there are others again remote, dreary, destitute of trees and almost all vegetation except that which is found on limitless moors. In the midst of one of these great moors stood a square-built house. Round the house was a garden. Round the garden were walls—solid brick walls six feet high. There were massive gates, which were locked at night. Within the gates was a smoothly kept

and broad avenue. This avenue led straight up in a direct line to the square-built house. The name of this house was Howgate Manor, and within it twelve young ladies received an education which was supposed to fit them for the world.

The school was absolutely unique of its kind. The mistress was old, and old-fashioned in her ideas. In a certain sense she never spared the rod, but her praise was worth winning, and she had the soundest possible principles. This lady, Mrs Howgate, was about sixty years of age. She was waiting in her parlour to receive Professor Primrose. She had received a telegram announcing that he would arrive. She was a good-looking woman, with slightly aquiline features, a somewhat low and yet broad forehead, and iron-gray hair arranged in two long ringlets at each side of her cheeks, and a cap of black velvet and lace on her head. Mrs Howgate wore black not only on her head, but her dress too was black, and a little black shawl worn in shawl-fashion was pinned across her shoulders. On her hands she had little black mittens of very fine silk. These hands themselves were gnarled and somewhat twisted, as though in this bleak part of the world she had suffered sorely from rheumatism.

When she saw the Professor she rose, and with a wonderful cordiality which took all

the severity from her face held out her hand to him.

'What a long time it is since we met, Hector Primrose, and how glad I am to see you again!'

'You received my telegram?' said the Professor.

'I did. It only arrived by the first post this morning. We are far from a telegraph office.'

'You are in the midst of nature's free world,' said the Professor. 'I should imagine this to be a most healthy spot.'

'It is. My girls never know what illness means.'

'May I relate to you my business?' asked the Professor.

'Certainly. You were always wont to come straight to the point. You find in me a woman after your own heart, for I too would come to the point without a moment's delay.'

'My point is this,' said the Professor. 'I want you to receive two young girls in your school this week. I want you to take their characters in hand, and to do what you can for them. One is my daughter; the other is a daughter of a certain Mrs Massereene, who, I understand, is a friend of yours.'

'By no means a friend,' said Mrs Howgate, 'but I knew her husband very well. She has written to me from time to time about one of her girls, who is, I understand, a little difficult to manage. I told her that I should have a

vacancy in the autumn, when dear Lady Desiré Marmaduke leaves us. I further said that I could, at a stretch, receive the young lady at once, but should on the whole prefer her not to come until the autumn. *Two* girls, however, are different. I break my rule if I take two girls, Hector Primrose.'

'Nevertheless,' said the Professor, 'you will do so, for one of the girls happens to be mine.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Howgate, 'then you have not found that plan of yours—that wonderful hill-top plan—to succeed?'

'It has failed, my friend, utterly.'

The Professor bowed his head. His attitude of extreme dejection was most apparent. Mrs Howgate looked at him sadly for a minute.

'I can make no promise until I know everything,' she said.

'It is difficult for me to tell you everything, but I will do what I can. Between Mrs Massereene and me there lies a gulf which can never be bridged. It relates to the past, and only affects her children and mine in so far that I do not wish them to become acquainted each with the other. This is what has taken place.'

The Professor then related in as few and forcible words as he could the whole story of Maggie's devotion to Jasmine, and Jasmine's devotion to her; how they had both done wrong—

more than wrong—in order to meet each other; how they were friends in spite of everything.

'And now,' he said, 'that the friendship is formed, all the scolding and severity in the world will not break it. But it must be tested. If it is worth anything, if there is gold in it, it will stand the severity of your school, Mrs Howgate. I want these two girls to come here, and at once, and I want you to manage them.'

'It is an extraordinary story, and it interests me,' said Mrs Howgate. 'Do you, on the part of your daughter, give me free permission to act as I think best?'

'I give you absolute and complete permission to do what you think right as regards Jasmine.'

'Then send her to me; she shall have my best care. I am not, believe me, really unkind. I make rules, and I require them to be obeyed. Will Mrs Massereene do likewise with regard to her daughter Margaret?'

'I can promise you that she will.'

'Then let the girls come this week. I will be good to them, but in my own way. Don't question me any further.'

The Professor thanked Mrs Howgate, and soon afterwards took his leave. He did not wish to see the other girls at the school, nor did he ask any questions with regard to her special mode of treatment. He left all these things absolutely to her. He had great faith in Mrs

Howgate, and believed that his scheme would succeed.

'If, in spite of everything, these two girls can conquer, their friendship, each for the other, will be worth having,' he said to himself. 'But they must be tested. There is no place where the test can be so well applied as at Howgate Manor.'

CHAPTER II.

AN ALARMING CHANGE.

ON the evening of the very day that the Professor had visited Mrs Howgate he returned once more to the neighbourhood of the hill-top. On this occasion he went straight to Mrs Blake's cottage. Jasmine happened to be within. She ran out to meet her father.

'Why, padre,' she said, 'where have you been? I am going home to-morrow, and have been wondering what you and the girls were doing without me. You look well, and'——

Mr Primrose hardly glanced at her.

'I will see you presently, Jasmine,' he said. 'Just pack your little things, and get ready to come back with me to the hill-top.'

'Must I to-night?' she asked, a discontented expression on her face.

'Yes; you must come to-night. There is much to be done and the time is short.'

Jasmine entered the kitchen, where Susan was busily engaged preparing a specially delicious supper.

'If you will bring your friends here you must

help me, missie,' she said as Jasmine appeared. 'You must just sit down there, and polish the silver. I cannot do everything—an old body like me.'

'Oh Susan?' cried Jasmine, 'you know perfectly well that Maggie doesn't care what she eats. Just bread-and-butter-and-jam will be quite enough for her.'

'Bread-and-butter-and-jam indeed!' exclaimed Susan. 'As if I'd demean myself putting that sort of supper before the quality! When the quality come to sup with my mistress they must eat a meal that they'll remember by-and-by. I think I have ready in the oven a supper that will please the young lady—cakes and delicacies of all sorts; and if you care to step into the pantry, Miss Jasmine, you will see jellies that'll make your mouth water. But all I ask of you, my dear, is that you will polish the silver.'

'I am so terribly sorry,' said Jasmine, tears springing to her eyes, 'but father is come.'

'Heaven preserve us!' said Susan. 'But why that face when you talk of your blessed father?'

'Only that Maggie—Maggie'——

Susan looked suspiciously at Jasmine.

'I have had my thoughts,' she said in a sententious voice; 'and my thoughts are not the most complimentary to you in the world, missie. I have my thoughts—and my doubts. If there's a man I respect on this earth it is Professor

Primrose, and I am very glad; and I hope he will stay to supper.'

'He wants me to go back with him, and I can't say "No," and I can't stay to supper. I came in to tell you so, Susan. He is talking to Mrs Blake at present, and I have to go up and pack my things.'

'And whatever is to become of my supper and Miss Maggie Massereene?'

'Oh, I don't know. I can't think what has happened, but I must go back; I know I must.'

Jasmine flew up to her room. Her heart was beating with terror. She soon collected her small possessions, and tied them in a quaint silk handkerchief. She took her little bundle down with her. The kitchen door was open, and Susan called out:

'If I was you, and if there's trouble brewing —and I have my misdoubts, my sore misdoubts —there is nothing for it but a full confession. If you *must* go off when your guest is arriving, without telling the truth to your father—why, go. My missis and I will entertain Miss Maggie. But unburden yourself to him as you are going up the hill. Never you mind whether he has a rod in pickle for you or not; get it off your mind —that is the only thing left to you. The Professor, I take it, is a father in a thousand, and if you have slighted him, or done anything mean, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

Make your peace with him anyhow, and them's my last words to you.'

Jasmine made no reply. Where was all her gladness of even a few hours ago? Wonderful to relate, she had, on the whole, spent a happy time in the plain. The variety of her existence, the delights of Castle Mary, had captivated her. She had been far away from the pure and lofty influence of her home, and, truth to tell, she had been glad her outbursts of conscience had not greatly troubled her. But now it was talking loudly. In addition to this, she was considerably frightened, and she felt as wretched as a little girl could feel as she waited outside the drawing-room door for her father to come out.

He came presently, looking pale but resolved. Mrs Blake was standing within the room. Mrs Blake kissed Jasmine. Her old face had a peculiar expression about it, but she had not been crying, and she did not say a single word of reproach to the girl. As she kissed her, however, very solemnly, she said:

'When we get as old as I am we see things clearly. You will be much startled, Jasmine, at what is about to take place; but I have always trusted in your father's great wisdom, and I am sure he is doing right now.'

'Oh, but what is it—what is it?' whispered the poor child. 'Do, do tell me!'

'He will tell you himself. You have done

very wrong; but I dare not say any more. Good-bye, child. When you get to my age you will see the reason for things that seem very difficult now. Learn your lesson, Jasmine; learn it thoroughly. It is a sharp one; but if you take it aright you will be all the better.'

'Come, Jasmine, I am waiting,' said her father.

She ran off. As they both turned in the direction of the hill-top she could not help looking back. Was Maggie in sight? No, there was no sign of her. Jasmine could not help giving a sigh of relief. What was about to happen? Her sense of being puzzled and alarmed grew greater and greater.

At last they began to climb the hill. Jasmine carried her own little bundle. The Professor leaned a trifle wearily on his stick. Suddenly Jasmine stopped.

'Father, what is wrong? You have something awful to say to me, I know. Please say it at once, and have done.'

The Professor turned and looked full at her.

'Have you nothing to say to me?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she answered.

'Nothing at all?'

'No, nothing at all. I have enjoyed myself with Mrs Blake. I don't know why I am obliged to come back to-night; but of course I must obey you.'

'Having *dis*obeyed me so tremendously, you are

now given no choice in the matter,' said the Professor. 'I am very, very angry with you. I do not think, perhaps, that even anger is the right word, for there is so much pain along with it. What have I done, Jasmine, that you should have acted as you did? I had my reasons for not wishing you to make a certain girl your friend. You did so in spite of all my reasons. I admit the temptation; but what sort of creature can a girl be who will not resist temptation? Is not life, from first to last, a series of temptations either fallen into or resisted? How dared you, Jasmine, fall deliberately into the first great temptation of your life?'

Jasmine began to sob.

'I—I loved her so much—and you seemed so —so cruel,' she sobbed; 'and I was so tired of the hill-top, and—and just the whole dull life, and I did want the world. And oh, father, I know you won't forgive me, but I—I—can't give her up—I *can't*, father!'

'You need not,' said the Professor; 'I do not wish it. There was a time when I did, but that time is over.'

'Father, do I hear you aright? Maggie Massereene may be my friend?'

'She is your friend. How can I sever friendship?'

'Oh father—father! Then you are not angry?'

'I told you, Jasmine, that anger is not the

word; there is too much pain at my heart for anger. You have done that which cannot be undone. You shall test your friend, and your friend shall test you. My child'—here the Professor took Jasmine's hand—'let us talk quietly each to the other as we are going back to that home which you think so little of—which you seem to despise. I will not expect impossible things of you, Jasmine. You are tired of the hill-top; well, let it go.'

'Oh no—no! I don't want that, only sometimes to see Maggie—once a week or so.'

'Excuse me, that is impossible; you must take the rough with the smooth. You and Maggie Massereene have committed sins of disobedience. You have rebelled against authority. You must therefore be punished. I have made arrangements, and so has Mrs Massereene, with my concurrence, that you both go to a school in Yorkshire; that you both submit to the rules of that school. Your friendship is subjected to the test of a very severe form of discipline. Your consolation will be that you submit to this discipline together. You, Jasmine, leave the hill-top the day after to-morrow, and, in company with your friend, go to Howgate Manor, where you will remain for at least a year. I have nothing more to say on the subject. The thing is arranged; you can tell your sisters.'

The Professor stopped talking. After a minute

he resumed his walk up the hill, and Jasmine went with him in absolute silence. They had nearly reached the top, when she suddenly pulled the chain and locket from her neck.

'I ought to show this to you. This was the beginning of things. When you would not let Violet have it, Maggie left it in my drawer for me, and I kept it, and wore it; but would you like it back?'

'No, keep it; that is a small matter. The graver thing is done, and cannot be undone.'

There never was a man like the Professor for taking, as his friends expressed it, the bit between his teeth. He had made up his mind, and no pleading on the part of Violet and Daisy could alter him. Jasmine was to go; she and Maggie were to test their friendship in an altogether fresh life.

'Notwithstanding her present deviation from the path of duty, the girl is in many respects a fine girl,' said Mr Primrose to Violet; 'but Jasmine will find in her new surroundings that her idol has feet of clay. Maggie Massereene will find out the same thing with regard to Jasmine. If, notwithstanding this test, they elect to be friends all through life, they will be friends indeed. I am sorry for you, my darling Violet; you will have to do without your sister for the present, but Daisy will console you.'

Violet burst into tears.

'I ought to show this to you.'

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'Jasmine is very unhappy,' she said; 'she looks quite ill. She told me every single thing last night. I don't think she would have done what she did if that dreadful Miss Simpson had not tempted her.'

'Ah, the governess!' said the Professor. 'I have not met her. It is a very good thing for Maggie Massereene that she is going away from her influence.'

Meanwhile, both at the castle and on the hill-top eager preparations were being made. The girls themselves felt in an extraordinary sense that they were being sent off to a sort of prison. They were not allowed, either of them, to meet till the day before their departure for school. As to Betty, she was very nearly demented. She had no trunks at all fit for her young lady, and no special wardrobe to put into them were such trunks forthcoming. But an old horsehair trunk which at one time belonged to Mrs Primrose was discovered in an unused lumber-room. This was polished up until the brass nails with which it was studded shone again, and by the aid of sundry additions from Violet's and Daisy's wardrobes Jasmine was prepared after a fashion for school.

Professor Primrose took no apparent interest in the matter.

It was of no consequence, he said, if she did go a little under-clothed; she was not going to school for pleasure, but she was going to learn the

proper proportions of life. 'She needs discipline, and she will have it.'

These were his constant words. He himself decided to take the girls to the Manor, and on the following day they started.

Maggie and Jasmine met at the railway station. The Professor took them third class, and they had a very uncomfortable journey. Neither girl felt inclined to speak to the other. Maggie kept leaning out of the window; Jasmine sat with her eyes glued to a book of history which her father had given her. Even at the little inn where they were forced to spend the night they were scarcely able to talk one to the other. There was a strange weight on their young hearts. They were afraid of that which lay before them.

It was in the middle of the night that Jasmine, who was broad awake and wondering what the next day would bring forth, sat up in bed in some alarm. She heard a tap at her door. The next minute it was softly opened, and Maggie came in.

'I can't stand it,' she said. 'I must have a few words with you. What is going to happen to us both? May I jump into your bed and talk to you?'

'Oh, do!' said Jasmine. 'I should love it better than anything.'

The feel of Maggie's warm body next her own brought comfort to poor Jasmine.

'It is all so dreadful!' she said—'father angry with me, the girls looking unutterable things, and you and I sent off like this together. What does it mean, Maggie, can you tell?'

'It is our punishment,' said Maggie. 'It is an awful school! Miss Simpson described it to me.'

'What is it like?' asked Jasmine.

'A sort of prison, no less. They will knock every bit of originality out of us. You would have done better without me on the hill-top, Jas; and I should have done better without you in the plain.'

Jasmine felt a queer sinking at her heart.

'If we feel like that now, having everything, I am indeed lost!' she said. 'My only consolation in saying good-bye to Violet and Daisy, and to father—although he is so cross to me now—is that of being with you.'

'Oh, it will be so different at school!' said Maggie; 'but, of course, we will cling together—we must—that is our only hope.'

'Yes, we must, we will!' said Jasmine.

'Ours ought to be a great and wonderful friendship,' said Maggie.

'So it will,' said Jasmine, kissing her.

They fell asleep presently with their arms round each other; and Maggie, when she awoke in the morning, looked long at Jasmine's sleeping face. It was a sweet face, notwithstanding the fact that the little possessor of it had strayed so far from

the ideals of her father. It was delicately outlined, like the most beautiful flower. Each little feature was in itself perfect, and the hair which curled round the broad brow gave it even a sort of dignity. Jasmine would be very clever.

'I wonder what we shall do at school,' thought Maggie. 'I wonder how we shall live in that dreadful prison-place—oh, I wonder, I wonder! We are being punished for loving each other. What a queer, dreadful man the Professor is! Mother seems quite afraid of him. Well, I suppose we must go through it now. Anyhow, we have each other.' She bent over and kissed Jasmine on her forehead. 'Wake up, Jas,' she said. 'School begins to-day, and I hear your father up. He will be in a hurry to take us to the Manor and leave us there.'

CHAPTER III.

FIRST EXPERIENCES.

MRS HOWGATE, from her earliest days, had been a remarkable personality. She had a will of her own, and knew how to use it. As a young girl, she had been left dependent on her own exertions to earn her living. She was in those days an old-fashioned governess. She taught exceedingly well; that is, she taught all the things she knew with perfect exactitude. She inspired the respect of her pupils, and also their affection. It is a certain fact, however, that she never spoiled them. She had the power of inspiring devotion, and yet she was a cold-mannered and severe woman. The real depths of her nature seldom came to the front, but all the girls whom she taught were her friends for life.

As she grew older, and as other modes of education became the fashion, she found it difficult to get a suitable post as private governess; but she had saved money, and she started a school.

Her school was full of theories. She would advance her pupils' interests, but in her own way. She hated all superficial knowledge. She believed in the old-fashioned things. She considered age

honourable, and instilled by every means in her power the doctrine into her young pupils' minds that they were to respect the old, that they were to do honour to their superiors, and that, above all things, they were to bear the yoke in their youth. She believed, too, in punishments, and when necessary inflicted them with rigour.

The number in her school of twelve was now augmented to fourteen by the arrival of Jasmine and Maggie. She, of course, reigned supreme. She had teachers who had been at one time her own pupils. They followed in her steps. Politeness —extreme politeness—was one of the institutions of the school. Conversation of an intellectual type was encouraged there. Idle gossip was forbidden. The days were mapped out with care; so much time was allotted to exercise, so much to health, so much to study. The girls went early to bed and rose early. They were never allowed outside the grounds except in the company of a teacher. Any girl in the school who happened to break the rules was punished by solitary confinement. She was 'sent to Coventry'—her fellow-pupils were not allowed to speak to her, she did her lessons alone, and was not allowed to mingle again with others until she had asked pardon of her governess.

Into this school was now about to enter one of the wildest and most ungovernable girls who could be found. That girl was Maggie Massereene.

She had openly defied Miss Simpson. She had done pretty much what she liked with her mother. She had learnt her lessons in a wrong way—neglected them or not as it pleased her, shutting out those which were not agreeable to her, and taking up those that were. To remove such a girl from her ordinary life to the school of Howgate Manor was practically, for the time at least, to put her in prison.

Jasmine was by nature less rebellious than Maggie, but she also had been brought up with a certain breadth of training and freedom of action which would make the restricted life of the Manor intensely disagreeable to her. Nevertheless, it was at this school these girls were at once to lose themselves and find themselves.

Professor Primrose parted with his daughter and Maggie Massereene on the threshold of the dismal house.

'You will soon be at home here,' he said, 'and, I trust, happy. I believe you will be allowed to write home once a week, but I think your letters will be read. No other correspondence will be allowed. The summer holidays are not at any distant date. You will have a month at school at first, however; in that time you can feel your feet. Now, good-bye, both of you.'

He kissed Jasmine very lightly on her forehead, shook hands with Maggie, and entered his cab. The two girls stood and watched the cab as it

rolled away; then they turned and faced each other.

'What does all this mean?' said Maggie.

'I don't know,' said Jasmine; 'I have not the slightest idea. But we are together, that is one thing,' she added.

Maggie's fine face softened.

'Yes,' she said in a low tone, 'this means a great deal to me. But we must ring; it seems so funny to leave us here with our boxes on the door-step.'

She turned and pulled a bell. A servant in a very neat costume appeared very soon after Maggie had rung. She seemed to expect the girls, and expressed no surprise of any kind at seeing them.

'I am Ann, miss,' she said, addressing Jasmine, 'and your room is ready for you. You have a room in the north wing—at least, miss, if your name is Miss Primrose.'

'Yes, I am Jasmine Primrose,' replied Jasmine.

'And you, miss, if you are Miss Massereene, have a room in the south wing.'

'Oh, but that won't do at all,' said Maggie; 'we want to sleep in the same room, or, at any rate, have rooms together.'

'I will speak to Miss Dunn, if you like, miss,' replied the girl. 'If you will step in here I will tell Miss Dunn that you have arrived.'

'Whoever is Miss Dunn?' said Maggie, who was

determined, as she expressed it, to put her foot down once and for all.

'She is the English mistress, and she sees about the young ladies' rooms. I will tell her you are here.'

'Do,' said Maggie.

The girls were ushered into a small room, the walls of which were covered with a very dull brown paper. A pair of huge globes stood on a stand at one side, and there were two or three chairs placed against the wall at the other. The window was screened with a wire blind, which caused the landscape outside, dreary at best, to look rather dull.

'This is not an interesting room,' said Maggie, turning to her companion.

'No,' replied Jasmine. She felt strangely quiet and dull. 'I am sure I shall hate this school,' she said.

'Oh, nonsense!' exclaimed Maggie. 'I have been thinking things over. Everything depends on how we begin. We must show at once that we won't brook bullying. English girls are never bullied in these days, and we won't allow it. If I am firm, will you be firm, Jasmine?'

'Oh, yes,' said Jasmine. 'I will do anything you want, Maggie.'

'Then that is right. Ah, I suppose this is Miss Dunn.'

A lady dressed from head to foot in a sombre

sort of brown now entered the room. She was pale, of uncertain age and uncertain colour. Her hair was drawn tightly back from her face and screwed into a little knob on the back of her head. She had very faint eyebrows and hardly any eyelashes. Her eyes were of a light, rather weak brown, to match her dress; her features were long, and her mouth prim and hard.

This lady came and stood before the two girls and said, 'Young ladies?' Her remark, made in the form of an interrogation, would have been disconcerting to most people, but Maggie called her courage to her aid and said at once:

'We have just come; we are the new girls. I am Maggie Massereene and this is Jasmine Primrose. We are great friends—very, very special friends; and your servant has just informed us that one of us is to sleep in the north wing of the house, and the other in the south. Will you kindly have that changed at once? We want to sleep close together, if not in the same room. You can manage that, can't you, Miss Dunn?'

'Your request is extraordinary,' said Miss Dunn, 'and if you were a few days in the school you would perceive that for yourselves. As you are new-comers, I forgive you. You will kindly do, while at Howgate Manor, what your teachers and those who are in authority over you wish, without consulting yourselves. It is a rule in this school—it is, in short, the governing principle—that girls

do not think of their own wishes, but of the wishes of their teachers. I am the person who arranges the bedrooms of the girls. I do not wish you, Maggie Massereene, to sleep in a room with another girl; therefore I have allotted you a small chamber to yourself. And you, Jasmine Primrose, are also elected to sleep in a room alone. Don't let there be any more fuss about the matter. Ann will take you to your bedrooms. When you get there, wash your hands, tidy your hair, and come down to dinner. Dinner is sharp at a quarter to one, and will be on the table in ten minutes. Any girl who is late wears a book on her head for the meal.'

'What?' said Jasmine.

'Are you deaf, Jasmine Primrose?'

'No.'

'Well, don't say "What?" in that silly manner again. Now, go to your rooms; don't delay. The gong will sound when dinner is ready. You will be on this occasion conducted to the dining-room; in future you will find your own way there.'

The girls looked at each other in dismay. Miss Dunn had a sort of finality about her—a sort of 'there is no use in appealing to me' air which subdued even the vivacious Maggie. She had not time even to exchange a word with Jasmine before Ann appeared. Ann conducted her straight to her chamber, and then, returning quickly to

the room where Jasmine was waiting, did the same for her.

Maggie's room was small, cold, and comfortless. There was a tiny iron bedstead drawn out almost to the middle of the room. On this was one hard mattress. The window was so arranged as not to shut properly; however hard you struggled and tried, two inches of window would always remain open. Although the weather was fine, indeed beautiful, in that part of England where the cottage on the hill-top was situated, and where Maggie's luxurious home, Castle Mary, was to be found, it was still exceedingly cold on this Yorkshire moor; and when, in addition, Maggie discovered that her room faced due north, she certainly did not feel particularly enamoured with it. It was quite destitute of ornament.

In addition to the bedstead, with its meagre-looking bed, there was a washhand-stand made of the plainest deal and painted a dull brown, a chest of drawers of the same material, and a curtain. Behind the curtain she discovered some hooks, and guessed that she was to keep the skirts of her dresses there. Beyond these articles of furniture, the room was quite bare. There was not a picture of any sort on the walls.

Maggie took off her hat, flung it on the bed, made a vain attempt to smooth her rebellious curly locks, and then, walking to the window, looked out. There was a glorious view of wide,

rolling moor from her window, but she was in no mood to see its beauty. She hated the school already; she felt that she would loathe the life, and she had not even that one sustaining thing—the close companionship of Jasmine; for Jasmine was far away from her in another quarter of the ugly house—how far she could not guess.

In the midst of her meditations she heard the sound of a bell being rung with considerable force. She guessed that it was the dinner-bell, and remembering Miss Dunn's parting shot, that all girls who were late wore books on their heads during the meal, hurried to be in time. In the passage she met several girls going downstairs to dinner. They were all primly dressed in brown, and wore their hair very smooth and rolled tightly round the back of their heads. This had a strange effect, for none of these girls, according to Maggie's way of thinking, ought to have their hair up at all. Nevertheless, it was hair-pinned in tight shining rolls just above the nape of the neck. The effect of hair so arranged gave them a painfully strained, old-fashioned look.

They hardly glanced at Maggie, who at least expected a little curiosity to be expended over her.

'If *I* lived in a hole like this,' she thought, 'and a new girl came, wouldn't I stare and stare? Wouldn't I just want to know her very

innermost thoughts, and even how many dresses she had, and what she did when she was at home? I am not especially interested in any girl at the present moment, but if I lived here long there is no saying.'

'Please,' she continued at this juncture, touching the arm of a small, pale girl whose name she afterwards discovered was Lucy Grey, 'will you show me the way to the dining-room?'

'*Il faut suivre tout droit pour la salle à manger*,' answered the girl in a prim voice.

Maggie's French was her weak point, and she did not at first clearly understand. The girl looked at her, and passed her without making another comment. Another girl, who might have been Lucy Grey's replica, now came up. She had merry brown eyes, but the merriment was evidently quenched in them. She looked full at Maggie, and then said:

'*Il ne nous est pas permis de parler anglais.* But perhaps you understand German best. *Es wird uns nicht erlaubt englisch zu sprechen. In den Speisesaal geht man gerade aus.*'

Maggie coloured. She had never felt smaller in her life.

'I ought to know both French and German,' she said impulsively; 'but the fact is, I know neither. I never would be bothered learning. Please tell me in plain English how I am to get to the room where we eat. I want to be

in time; I don't want to wear a book on my head all through dinner.'

The girl so addressed laughed, then sighed; then, putting her finger to her lips, said in a low tone, 'Follow me;' and Maggie found herself in the midst of a small procession all going in one direction. In a few minutes they entered what was known as the refectory.

It was a bare room on the ground floor, without any carpet. The girls sat on benches which ran down each side of a narrow table. The table was covered with a scrupulously clean cloth; but the dinner-service was of a coarse, thick make; the knives and forks had black handles, the glasses were thick and of the coarsest quality, and there were no serviettes.

Maggie, however, had no time or thoughts to ponder over these things. She was looking for Jasmine. Would Jasmine at least sit with her during dinner? But no. It is true that Jasmine was in the same room; but she was placed at the other side of the table, quite close to Mrs Howgate herself, whereas Maggie was in the vicinity of the detested Miss Dunn.

When all the girls were assembled Mrs Howgate said grace. The covers were lifted from two dishes, one of which was placed before the headmistress, the other before Miss Dunn. The girls all sat mute and reverent, their hands patiently folded on their laps, their eyes fixed on their

plates. The servants, Ann and a man-servant, whose name Maggie afterwards discovered to be Mark, handed round the food, which consisted of plain boiled mutton, with turnips and potatoes. Now, Maggie loathed boiled mutton, and could scarcely endure the large piece which was placed before her. She pushed it about discontentedly with her fork, ate a very tiny morsel, and then laid down her knife and fork. As she did so Miss Dunn bent towards her.

'Perhaps you had better know the rules; it is only kind to you. Whatever food you leave at dinner-time is given to you again at supper.'

'I can't eat boiled mutton,' said Maggie in reply.

'There is no "can't" allowed in this establishment,' said Miss Dunn. 'If you would substitute "won't" for "can't" you would come nearer the mark, and be at least truthful.'

Maggie coloured crimson. She longed to burst into a rage, but with a mighty effort restrained herself. The girls were all silent during the meal, except when one asked another to pass the salt or the mustard. When they did this they spoke either in the French or the German tongue. Mrs Howgate was absolutely silent, eating her mutton with praiseworthy speed, and Miss Dunn only spoke to utter a correction. Maggie, having got over her first feeling of rage, was able to look at her fellow-pupils.

In their dull dresses, with their painfully arranged hair, they looked one and all of them like sheep of the same fold or peas out of the same pod. They seemed utterly colourless and without a scrap of vitality about them. Maggie, with her brown mane of tumbled, untidy hair, and Jasmine, with her lovely, soft, fine hair curling naturally round her brow, with her eyes like violets, and her sweet face a little puzzled and anxious, looked both of them like creatures from another world. They belonged to the world of the free, the natural, the unrestrained. Oh, it would be impossible to live here!

Maggie's eyes sought those of her friend, but Jasmine was steadily ploughing through her mutton and did not glance at Maggie, who felt hurt.

'Is she forgetting me already?' she thought. 'Have we sacrificed so much to be together and for this to be the end?'

The mutton, turnips, and potatoes were followed by rice-pudding; but Maggie as little appreciated rice-pudding as she did boiled mutton. She was sufficiently hungry, however, to eat the portion assigned to her, and so far secured the good graces of Miss Dunn. Her plate of untasted mutton was put solemnly away by Ann on a shelf by itself. But Maggie was determined that no living power should get her to swallow it. The rice-pudding being consumed, the meal was

supposed to have come to an end. Mrs Howgate offered up a thanksgiving at the end of the meal, and the girls—all except Jasmine and Maggie—filed in orderly fashion out of the room. Maggie was about to follow her companions, when Mrs Howgate raised her hand.

'One moment, my dear,' she said.

She called the two girls to her, motioning at the same time to Miss Dunn to come forward.

'Miss Dunn,' she said, 'these heads will not do. You must have them reduced to the same absolute order that prevails amongst the other heads in the school.'

'Are you going to cut them smaller?' asked Maggie in an exceedingly pert voice.

Mrs Howgate did not even pretend to hear.

'In this school,' she said, 'little girls are seen and not heard. In this school little girls obey; their wishes are not consulted; they come here to learn, not to do what they themselves think right. Little girls of your age, Maggie Massereene, are intensely ignorant. They have no experience of life. Such girls come to Howgate Manor to be taught.'

'To have all their individuality crushed out of them,' said Maggie.

'Insubordination is severely punished,' said Mrs Howgate. 'I should advise you, Margaret, not to attempt it.—As for you, Jasmine, you will do what you are told. I have great respect for

your father, and trust that you will prove a worthy daughter.—Now go; Miss Dunn will take you to your rooms and attend to your toilet. You must not wear your present dresses; we have a uniform in the school, and yours will be in your rooms ready to put on when you get there. You are not allowed, either, to speak English except on Sundays. A word of English spoken entails a bad mark; a bad mark entails an added lesson; an added lesson entails standing in the corner; standing in the corner entails wearing a book on your head during meals. The rules are many in this house. You, who are accustomed to no rules, will at first find them irksome, and you will probably struggle against them; but I may as well assure you in advance that such struggling on your part will be worse than useless. I have managed girls much more obstreperous than either of you, and I mean both of you to be subdued and taught to obey. You will at first find it difficult, but after a time you will rejoice in the self-control which you will gain and in the knowledge which you will acquire. I will not say any more to you at present, for I am due in the schoolroom to take the first class in French. Go up to your rooms, both of you; Miss Dunn will attend to you each in turn.'

'But'—— began Maggie.

'"But," my dear Maggie, is a word not allowed

in this establishment. Go. Don't delay; the time is precious. A golden hour once lost can never be restored.—By the way, Jasmine Primrose, what is that which you are wearing round your neck?'

Poor Jasmine was wearing the little gold chain and diamond locket which Maggie had given her on that day which seemed now, oh, so far, so very far away!

'I do not allow ornaments here,' said Mrs Howgate. 'Take that thing off, and give it to me.'

'But it is mine,' said Jasmine, getting very red.

'You shall have it when you leave the school; I will take charge of it. Such a trinket round your neck is quite unsuitable; give it to me at once.'

Mrs Howgate would have taken it, but she waited for Jasmine to remove it herself from her neck. A minute or two later the girls left the room. Maggie would have given half a world to say something to Jasmine. If she could have been assured of Jasmine's sympathy she might have borne her present position a little better. But Jasmine, accompanied by Mrs Howgate herself, left the room in one direction, while she (Maggie), in the company of Miss Dunn, went in another. As they were going upstairs Maggie spoke:

'I must say something or I shall die! I hate

your school and your ways. I was never accustomed to anything of this sort. I will write to mother and ask her to take me from school immediately. She would not be so cruel as to leave me here if she knew. You have no comforts, not even the semblance of comfort, and I am accustomed to'——

'Luxuries,' interrupted Miss Dunn, 'so very bad for one.'

'You would call them luxuries,' answered Maggie, 'but to me they are necessities.'

'Mere force of habit,' said Miss Dunn. 'This is your room.'

'I hate my horrid room! Why should not Jasmine at least share it with me?'

'Mrs Howgate prefers that Jasmine Primrose should have a room at the other side of the house. Now, don't be silly; put on your dress, and stop talking.'

'What dress?' asked Maggie, whose face was scarlet.

'That brown dress lying on the bed.'

'I won't wear the horrid, frightful thing!'

'Put it on, and don't talk any more about it. I am here to see that it is done.'

'I tell you I won't wear it.'

For answer, Miss Dunn went up to Maggie and began to unfasten the pretty, stylish frock she was wearing at that moment. The girl turned aside with fury.

'I say I *won't* stand you and your mean ways! I will write by this very post to mother. She will take me away immediately; I know she will.'

Miss Dunn smiled. Perhaps her smile was the most provoking thing about her. She was not a bad woman at heart, but she lived in a groove, and could not understand anything outside that groove. Maggie was like a wild creature newly caught in a trap.

'You may write,' said Miss Dunn, 'but your letter won't go. We read every letter before it is allowed to be posted. Rebellious letters, therefore, never get to their destination. I tell you this in order to show you the sooner you submit the happier you will be. Now, get into your frock.'

'I hate you! Oh, how I hate you!' said Maggie.

'If I reported this,' said Miss Dunn, still with that slow, disagreeable smile on her face, 'I could get you into the most terrible hot water. We have a silent room here for rebellious girls. I assure you I have no idea of being revengeful, or of taking advantage of your fit of temper. I know that both you and Jasmine will have a disagreeable time to-day, but you will soon get accustomed to things. Lucy Grey, Mary Pimpernel, and all the others are as happy as possible. They have no wishes except to obey dear Mrs

Howgate, to eat their food, to learn their lessons, to sleep, to walk, to garden, to prepare for the midsummer prize. Their lives are full, and discontent never reaches them. You will be the same before a week is out. The more you struggle, the worse it will be for you. You must be conquered in the end. You don't suppose that a little girl of your age can have any effect upon us? Now, let me put you into your frock.'

'It is so hideous!' said Maggie.

'It is not pretty; but we don't encourage vanity here.'

Maggie never knew how it was that she did submit, but certain it is that within half-an-hour the dress of dainty spring muslin, with its frills and furbelows, its little knots of coloured ribbon, its dainty belt, its pretty tie for the throat, was exchanged for a robe of no cut whatever, of no shape whatever, and of the dingiest, commonest shade of brown. This unornamented dress, with the long, tight sleeves, with the plain bodice, and skirt sewn on to the same, had such a peculiar effect on Maggie herself that, as she afterwards expressed it, she lost some of her spirit when she put it on. It was much, much easier to be defiant in the spring muslin dress than it was in the hideous brown. Soon after school further changes were necessary. Brown stockings and brown shoes—shoes of the

coarsest make—had to be substituted for the dainty black shoes and stockings which Maggie had been wearing. But the worst was yet to come. No change of toilet could take the curl out of Maggie's luxuriant hair. Nevertheless, that had to be effected before she became a truly model girl of Howgate Manor.

A scene of considerable pain ensued, for Miss Dunn was inexorable. She brushed and brushed, and when all her brushing turned out to be futile she used pomade, and at last did get Maggie's fine locks into some sort of order. She parted the little girl's hair in the middle, and, plaiting it tightly, rolled it round the back of her head.

'I wonder you don't alter the shape of my eyes too,' said Maggie. 'I am the greatest fright in existence. Oh, do look at me! Don't I scare you?'

'I have already told you that we don't encourage vanity here,' said Miss Dunn. 'Now you have something off your mind; it doesn't matter in the very least whether you are good-looking or the reverse. You must be neat; that is all that is expected of you. Go downstairs now into the garden and talk to the other girls; you will be allowed to speak English until to-morrow, and you need not do any lessons until to-morrow either. You belong to us now, and you will find your little companion Jasmine

She brushed and brushed.

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there. In my opinion, you are vastly improved. You look like a modest young girl, not like a scarecrow; but please understand that the smallest effort on your part to bring your hair back to the wild and disgraceful confusion in which I found it will necessitate my applying the scissors. I can thereby reduce your hair to an inch in length and keep it in that condition during your stay in the school. I don't wish to do that, for all my endeavours are for your good. But you must be careful.'

'Thank you. I will,' said Maggie.

This threat had told. She was determined to escape from the school on the first possible opportunity, and certainly did not wish to reappear at Castle Mary with hair an inch long.

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST INTRODUCTIONS.

AMONGST the girls at the school was one of the name of Matilda Dawson. She was a tall, lanky, bony-cheeked girl of between sixteen and seventeen years of age. She was dressed exactly like her companions, in hideous, ill-fitting brown, with brown stockings and brown shoes. Her lank, hay-coloured hair, destitute by nature of any attempt at curl, yielded to the Howgate Manor treatment. It was fastened very tightly round her head, and was pushed back from a broad brow which indicated considerable intelligence. Matilda's eyes were of a light blue, the pupils of which were slightly dilated, and the eyelashes black. Her eyes were, therefore, the redeeming feature of her face. Her mouth was rather small and pursed up. She had a somewhat sanctimonious air, and was looked up to by her companions. She was, in short, the head-girl in the school and Mrs Howgate's pride.

Matilda had come to Howgate Manor when quite a little girl of not more than twelve years of age, and had been trained in all the traditions of the school. She was now in the position of being able to do exactly what she liked both

with the pupils and teachers. Even Mrs Howgate deferred to her opinion and consulted her when a particularly unruly girl was admitted into the fold. It generally took from a week to a fortnight to break a new girl in, and during that period Matilda Dawson was in her glory. She assisted in the work, saying and doing things which the teachers themselves could not or would not attempt. It needed but a glance from her keen, large, light-blue eyes to take in the position of Jasmine Primrose and Maggie Massereene. She knew that they were of the rebellious sort, that they were likely to give extreme trouble in the school—that, in short, they would require the rod.

Matilda had no wish whatever to add to the misery of any girl who came to the school. She herself was satisfied with her lot. She considered Mrs Howgate the best woman in the world. She liked Miss Dunn; she respected the present Mademoiselle. There had been others in the school who, owing to Matilda, were dismissed. On the whole, she was friendly with the German Fräulein, and the masters who came at intervals to teach music and drawing were quite to her mind. The school was, she considered, perfect. There was no rebellion in it; but the arrival of the two black sheep seemed to alter matters.

It stimulated Matilda when Maggie came downstairs practically shorn of all her glory, her ugly

frock taking all the grace out of her little figure, her hideous coiffure removing the vivacity from her face. Matilda went slowly up and congratulated her.

'You are now a true girl of the Manor,' she said. 'We must initiate you into our different pursuits. We have secret societies and all kinds of amusements here; we are by no means dull; we have our own fun, and enjoy it immensely.'

Maggie looked at her out of those wide saucer-eyes which not even her pomatumed locks could alter.

'I *hate* the school, and you, and everybody in it!' she said.

'Oh, of course you will feel like that to-day,' said Matilda calmly, 'and your sentiments will probably be even more pronounced at supper-time, when you will be expected to eat the cold mutton which you rejected at dinner.'

'Never!' cried Maggie; 'no one shall force me to eat it.'

'Let me give you a word of advice,' said Matilda. 'It will be kept for your breakfast; so the sooner you get it down the better for yourself. In a week's time you will be hungry and you will eat your plain meals. I can tell you at once exactly what they are. We have for breakfast: tea, rather weak and very slightly sweetened, bread-and-butter, and one egg each. The bread is stale and the butter is put on

very thinly. We have for dinner: boiled mutton with turnips one day, roast round of beef the next. There is no other variety—boiled mutton, roast beef, day and day about. On Sundays during summer we have occasionally roast lamb. We do not indulge in fowls or anything of that sort. When we have boiled mutton we have rice-pudding with it. When we have roast beef we have tapioca-pudding. For tea we have milk-and-water and bread-and-butter, the bread stale and the butter thin. We have supper at half-past seven, and that meal consists of slices of cold meat and bread, with a little water. That is our invariable fare. It is quite wholesome, I assure you, and after the first week or so the pupils at Howgate Manor are all hungry enough to enjoy it. Now, will you come with me, and let me introduce you to the other girls?'

'I don't want to know them.'

'Oh, but you may as well. You must know them first or last.'

'I want to see my friend Jasmine Primrose.'

'She is walking in the paddock with Agnes Powell. Agnes is one of the nicest girls in the school. Come along, let me introduce you to the others.'

Maggie found herself following. She did not want to go, but Matilda seemed to have a sort of power over her. She introduced her to certain Roses, Marys, Anns, and Susans. They all

looked alike to Maggie; as far as she could tell, they had not a scrap of individuality about them. They seemed to think a great deal of Matilda Dawson, and to be anxious to follow in her footsteps. Matilda was quite kind in her manner to them, but was also patronising.

Having performed what she considered her duty with regard to Maggie, she said:

'You will find lessons rather difficult here. Our object is thoroughness. Nothing is allowed to be slurred over. I don't know how you have been taught, but you will be put back to the very beginning unless you know things thoroughly.'

Maggie exclaimed indignantly that she was quite well educated for her age, and had no idea of going back to the beginning in anything.

'You won't have a voice in the matter,' was Matilda's remark; and then she went off singing softly under her breath.

'What an intensely disagreeable girl!' said Maggie to Susan Welsh, the last girl to whom she happened to be introduced.

'Whom do you mean?' asked Susan, turning her dove-like brown eyes in Maggie's direction.

'Why, that creature you call Matilda Dawson.'

'Oh, how can you say so? She is the head-girl of the school, and Mrs Howgate's special favourite.'

'Well, she is not my special favourite. I detest her, as indeed I detest you all,' said Maggie.

Susan looked pained.

'I felt like that when I first came here,' she said in a low tone; 'but I got over it. It took me a few weeks; but I am quite happy here now—I mean, I am contented. They say I have learned everything very, very thoroughly, and that the things I have learned I shall remember all my life. It is not exactly a pleasant experience, but it is much better to submit.'

'There is no submission in me,' said Maggie. 'The school is detestable; it is absolutely cruel. I wish I had not come.'

'We all wish that when we first come,' said Susan again; 'but you will get reconciled like the rest of us. I tell you, you must accept the inevitable. There is no way out.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'You will have to stay.'

'I will write to mother; she will soon send for me.'

'If your letter is complaining it won't be posted. Mrs Howgate reads all the letters.'

'Oh, she is a wretch! But I'll manage to get some one to post it.'

'You won't be able. I thought I could when I first came. I was very miserable. I left such a bright home—sisters and brothers and cousins of my own—ours was a sort of Liberty Hall. When I came here I was nearly mad, and I bribed the gardener's boy. I gave him a shilling

to put a letter in the post for me. I poured out my whole heart to mother, and begged and implored of her to take me back. But do you know what that wretch did? He took my shilling and the letter, and gave them both to Miss Dunn; and, oh, wasn't I punished! I can tell you I never tried that on again.'

'Why, what happened to you?' asked Maggie in a voice of some interest.

'You had better not know. I only trust it won't happen to you. But I was alone for two days, and fed only on bread and water. At the end of that time I was mild enough to submit to anything. I tell you I was nearly mad at first, but now I wonder at my own feelings. You have come at such a good time, too, for you will only have a month of it before you go home.'

'Yes, that is true,' said Maggie; 'that makes it just bearable. Oh, there is Jasmine in the distance! Should I know her in that hideous frock and with her pretty hair plastered to her head? Don't you think her a very, very pretty girl, Miss—er—I don't remember your name?'

'Call me Susan, please; we all call each other by our Christian names here.'

'Well, Susan, don't you think Jasmine very pretty?'

'We are not allowed to say whether people are pretty or not. It's the beauty of the spirit we have to cultivate.'

'Bosh!' said Maggie.

She left her companion. Jasmine and Agnes Powell were now coming towards them. Agnes was a fair-haired girl, with a gentle expression of face. It seemed to Maggie at that moment that Jasmine wore just the same expression. Her eyelids were lowered. With her neatly plaited hair and in her brown frock, she did not look in the very least like a hill-top girl.

'Oh, runcible girl, what has come to you?' said Maggie, running up to her friend and rudely snatching her hand away from Agnes, and pulling her in an opposite direction.

'May I introduce Agnes Powell?' said Jasmine.

'How do you do?' answered Maggie. 'But I have no special time to talk to you now; I want to say a great many things to my friend. This is an odious school, and I think that you, Jasmine, I, and all the rest are frights, bogies, horrors!—Come away, Jasmine; we'll soon have to go into the house, or do something else horrid. Why, what is the matter? How queer you look!'

'I will come with you, of course,' said Jasmine.

She took Maggie's hand. They found a walk where they were not alone—for no one ever seemed to be alone at the Manor—but where they at least could talk without being heard.

'This is the most horrible place I have ever even dreamed about,' said Maggie. 'We must get away at once.'

'Oh, but we can't,' said Jasmine.

'What do you mean? Have you no spirit?'

'I know we can't. There is no manner of use talking about it. We are here, and we have got to stay; there is nothing for it but to submit.'

'What!' cried Maggie; 'endure what is little better than slavery? I won't—I sha'n't submit! Jasmine, you are my own chosen friend. You have been sent here because of me, and I have been sent here because of you. We cannot endure this life; we must leave it.'

Jasmine laid her hand with great tenderness on Maggie's arm.

'I love you with all my heart,' she said. 'We have been sent here as a punishment. I think the only possible way to get any good out of our lives is to take our punishment patiently. I don't suppose you like it, but I know there is no way out.'

'I shall find a way,' said Maggie. 'Bolts and bars won't keep me. All I want to ask of you now is this: if I find a way to escape will you come with me?'

'Oh, I don't know; I hardly dare.'

'You don't pretend that you like it?'

'No, I hate it; but I think of father. I must submit.'

'No, you needn't; you have cast in your lot with mine. I will never let you suffer. There was one great thing mother did for me. She

gave me plenty of money before I came away. I have twelve whole sovereigns, and I took the precaution to fasten them into the lining of my corsets. They won't be found there. I don't suppose even these horrid people will go the length of searching all our clothes. With twelve sovereigns we can do wonders. We could go to a seaside place and have a real spree all to ourselves. It is only just scaling those walls, and I am sure we can do that some night. I will think over a plan and let you know. We can't stay here; but if you will promise to escape with me, when I do escape, I will have courage to endure up to that moment.'

'I don't know what to think,' said Jasmine. 'At present my only feeling is that I have been very wicked; that I ought never to have come down from the hill-top and had that glorious time with you; that I am being punished, and I ought to take it patiently.'

'You poor, miserable darling! don't I feel that too? I wish now that I had obeyed your father and Lord Dunbar. But we are here, and we have got to get away. I must say it was a most ingenious mode of torture. But there, there! if you are with me I can stand anything.'

'I am with you, only I don't want to be more wicked,' said poor Jasmine.

Just at that moment a bell was rung, and all the girls were expected to troop into the

house. Tea was prepared—that most uninteresting meal, not even worthy of the name—in the refectory. Stacks of white bread-and-butter and jugs of milk-and-water were put upon the table. Miss Dunn poured milk-and-water into mugs for each girl, and they were expected to eat two slices of bread-and-butter apiece. This Maggie thought a great deal too much, but, remembering the cold mutton incident, managed to consume it. After tea those girls who were old pupils assembled in the schoolroom for lessons; but, as Maggie and Jasmine had nothing to do, they were requested each to take a piece of plain sewing, and one to sit in the brown parlour and the other in the gray library and work diligently until supper-time. Jasmine did her work with expedition and despatch. She had been well taught plain sewing by Betty, and profited now by her instruction. Maggie, on the contrary, had never done a stitch of real needlework in her life. In consequence, she bungled sadly over the sheet which she was expected to turn, and when Miss Dunn appeared, was requested to unpick all her work.

'Another time, when this occurs, you will have a bad mark,' said the English teacher. 'To-night I will excuse you. I never saw such disgraceful sewing in my life—all puckered up, and such long stitches! If you really don't know how to sew, Maggie, you had better begin at the

beginning. I will give you a strip of calico and teach you the different stitches.'

'Oh, I know quite well,' said Maggie. 'I won't begin at the beginning, please.'

'Well, please yourself; there is a sewing-class here for half-an-hour every day, and those girls who sew badly are kept in during play-hours to unpick their work and do it over again. They also get bad marks. A bad mark means an hour off the half-holiday at the end of the week. You will learn to dislike your bad marks, I assure you, when you understand what they mean. The model of this school is thoroughness in everything—thoroughness joined to humility. Now, as a matter of fact, you can't sew at all. You need to be taught. If you choose to humble yourself you will be taught, and then you won't get bad marks. You will sit with the little girls on a low form and learn your sewing and stitching, and your running and your hemming. At first you will prick your fingers and do everything abominably, but in the end you will conquer. I am delighted with Jasmine Primrose's work. It is perfectly done. She is a much better-taught girl than you.'

'She is not—she doesn't know anything!' said Maggie, who was in such a temper by this time that she would not even stand up for Jasmine.

'To-morrow morning,' said Miss Dunn calmly,

'Mrs Howgate herself will examine you both, and put you in your respective classes. You won't have a moment of waste time in the school. Now, go upstairs, wash your hands, and smooth your hair. There is a hideous curl sticking out in front of your forehead. Get rid of it; use pomade if necessary. If I see it obtruding itself in the course of the evening I shall snip it off. Then come downstairs to supper.'

Supper was a meal of great torture to poor Maggie, for she found on her plate the detestable cold mutton which she had refused to eat at dinner. She made the best of matters now by bolting it, and resolved in future never to leave her meals untasted. But her trials of that unhappy day were not yet at an end.

Soon after supper followed prayers—a somewhat dreary performance, conducted on this occasion by Miss Dunn. The girls all looked disappointed when Miss Dunn took her place beside the desk, and, opening the Book of Books, began to read.

Susan Welsh was near Maggie, and whispered to her, 'Oh, if you only heard Mrs Howgate on this occasion!'

There was no reason given for Mrs Howgate's absence. Miss Dunn read a psalm. The girls then knelt, and one or two collects were read aloud, after which the Lord's Prayer ended the little service. Then they all took their candles and retired for the night. Maggie had not even an

opportunity of saying good-night to Jasmine; but she saw, or fancied she saw, quite a pleasant smile on her friend's face, and noticed that she went away with Agnes Powell, talking eagerly to her as she did so.

When Maggie reached her room she went to the window, flung it wide open, and sitting down on the window-sill, looked out. She was more than ever determined to get away as soon as possible, to leave this horrid prison, and at any cost to find herself once more enjoying freedom. Jasmine should come with her. It is true that she and Jasmine were together at this school, but for all the good they were to each other they might just as well have never come to it at all. Poor Maggie felt more than ever like one caught in a trap. She had only one star of hope: escape she would, and with as little delay as possible.

She thought with deep satisfaction of the twelve pounds which she had so artfully concealed about her person. A light tap on the wall of the opposite room attracted her attention.

'What is the matter?' she said.

And a voice remarked, 'You had better get into bed at once, or you will find yourself in trouble.'

Maggie thought it best, on the whole, to obey this hint. There was no good in fighting against the rules of the school; they seemed to be so inflexible that an ordinary girl could not stand out against them. She therefore undressed slowly,

took her hair out of its hideous plaits, rejoiced to see it thick and fuzzy once more, and lay down on the bed. The bed was hard, the blankets heavy. The hideous room seemed to the girl more hideous after she had put the light out. But fatigue brought sleep, and in sleep she forgot herself and all her troubles.

She awoke to the harsh sound of the bell at six on the following morning, and jumping up, began to dress quickly. All the girls must be downstairs and in their class-rooms by six thirty. When she took up her corsets, however, she noticed something wrong with them, and now, putting them on, discovered, to her horror, that all her money had been abstracted during the night. What had happened? Who had taken it? She was at Howgate Manor, and—penniless!

CHAPTER V.

A HUNGRY MORNING.

NEVER before had Maggie Massereene's wild heart felt as it did that morning; never before had all her worst passions been aroused. She sat down, half-dressed as she was, on her bed, put on her dressing-gown, and awaited results. She looked round wildly for a bell. Strange to say, there was one. She rang it. A startled-looking servant appeared.

'What is it, Miss Maggie?' she said.

'My name is Miss Massereene. Don't call me by my Christian name,' said Maggie. 'I have been robbed, and the thief must be discovered. Please go and acquaint Miss Dunn or Mrs Howgate. I don't go downstairs until steps are taken to secure the thief. Go at once.'

The frightened-looking girl vanished. Maggie sat on the edge of her bed. The sun began to pour into the ugly little room. It flooded the landscape outside; but there was a keen wind blowing, and, as an inch of window was open, the girl shivered slightly as she sat. Presently she heard her schoolfellows going downstairs. They marched in a sort of rhythmic measure along the

corridor and down the stairs. Then there followed stillness. Still she sat on. She felt inclined to ring again, but refrained. The servant's terrified look had to a certain extent appeased her. She felt quite convinced that there would be a great fuss made, and that her money would, of course, be restored to her. The idea of any one stealing twelve sovereigns from a schoolgirl would surely not be permitted even in such a heathenish place as Howgate Manor.

After a time she felt composed enough to continue her dressing. She put on her mangled corsets, and very unwillingly donned the hideous brown dress. Her hair she would not pomatum or plait tightly. Again she sat—the picture of rebellion, anger, and misery—on the edge of her little bed. It must be seven o'clock now. At half-past seven the girls had breakfast. Maggie had only eaten the detested mutton the night before, and was hungry enough to wish for the bread-and-butter, weak tea, and egg which she ought to receive for her breakfast. But seven undoubtedly passed on to half-past seven. Yes, she knew it was that hour by the sound of the harsh gong which seemed to fill the house. Her bedroom was too far away for her to hear the sound of the girls' footsteps going into the refectory.

Would any one bring up her breakfast? She could not tell. Jasmine surely might have come to her. Surely Jasmine was not in such a prison

that she could not come near her friend! Perhaps, after all, she was silly to have called a servant and made a complaint to her. It might have been wiser to announce the losses which had occurred in the presence of the assembled school. It would have certainly been more effective. She could do it still. No other person was keeping her upstairs but herself. She might go down now. She made up her mind to do this, and had just risen from her seat on the edge of her comfortless bed when the door was opened and no less a person than Mrs Howgate herself appeared.

Mrs Howgate had that calm, colourless face which sometimes accompanies great strength of character. Whatever emotions she possessed were kept under absolute control. She looked steadily at Maggie, and said in a clear tone—and the head-mistress's voice was quite beautiful—'Why isn't your hair in order? And why are you neglecting your duties?'

'My money was stolen in the night,' said Maggie. 'I rang the bell for a servant; I told her to tell you. The thief must be found and searched. I had twelve pounds given to me by mother. I sewed the money for security into my stays. Some one has stolen it—some thief in the night—and unpicked the stays and taken the money out.'

'I prefer you to call the article of dress to which you allude corsets,' said Mrs Howgate in

the calmest of tones. 'I may as well tell you at once that your supposed thief is your mistress. I possess your money. Miss Dunn came in, as is the custom with regard to all the new pupils, to take away all articles of value which you happen to possess and put them into my keeping. Your money is safe; you will receive it when you return home for the holidays.'

'But—but,' said Maggie, almost stammering in her impotent fury, 'I—I want it now. I want it during the time that I am at school. Mother is —is rich, and she gave it to me for the purpose.'

'Your mother put you absolutely under my control, and wrote me a letter saying that she wished you to conform to the rules of the school. One of my strictest rules is that no girl has money during her stay here. I post your letters; I supply you with stationery; I give you any innocent enjoyments which I consider you worthy of. In short, I act as your mother for the time being. I do not ask you why you wish for that money. It is a large sum for any girl to possess; but, as I have already said, it will be returned to you on the day you leave here for the holidays.'

'Please, Mrs Howgate,' said Maggie, 'I don't want to stay.'

'My dear,' said Mrs Howgate in a quite kind tone, 'there never was any girl who came to the Manor who, during the first fortnight, wished to stay. If you did want to stay I should consider

you unnatural. Do you know why you have come here?'

'To—to be taught, I suppose.'

'Yes,' said the head-mistress, 'to be taught the lessons of humility and obedience and absolute submission; to be taught that you are nothing, and that others are a great deal. In addition to these moral attributes, which I, your head-mistress, hope to instil into your mind, I trust I may have the pleasure of imparting to you correct English in its wide and varied branches, and some knowledge of really good French. If you love music you will be taught to play, at least correctly. You will have your share of gymnastics to develop your figure; you will be taught needlework—at present I hear you know nothing about it; immaculate neatness will be instilled into you. These things will cost you much; some pain of body, a considerable amount of pain of mind. The sooner you submit the better for yourself. There is no chance of your running away, and no chance of your submitting a complaint to your mother. You are here under conditions which cannot be broken. Now, I have come upstairs all this way to tell you my true thoughts. Get ready immediately and be down in the hall for prayers in ten minutes' time; after that you and Jasmine Primrose will come to me to my private lecture-room to be examined with regard to your present attainments.'

Before poor Maggie could reply even by a word, the calm-looking head-mistress had left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

'Oh, if I could—could—could only do something!' thought the distracted girl. Then she sat still and quiet. Another step was coming along the corridor. The room door was opened, and Miss Dunn appeared.

'Really,' she said, 'this is very disagreeable and troublesome! And your hair not done yet! You must learn to do it for yourself, or—the scissors.'

She touched a huge pair which hung at her girdle.

'Now then, where is the pomatum? In a week's time those hideous, rebellious locks of yours will get into position. You must pomatum freely until this occurs.'

She smeared the girl's hair with vaseline, plaited it tightly, and pinned it round her head.

'Now, you are just in time for prayers; come along.'

'But,' said Maggie, 'I have had no breakfast.'

She was really feeling the pains of hunger.

'I am sorry,' said Miss Dunn, 'but breakfast is over. No one prevented your coming to it. You must wait now until eleven o'clock, when a piece of stale dry bread is given to each girl. We dine at one. I expect you will eat your roast beef to-day.'

Poor Maggie, feeling as she had never done before, went downstairs and entered the class-room. The thirteen other girls were present; Maggie made the fourteenth. It seemed to her as she appeared that no one even glanced at her. Jasmine and Agnes Powell were standing near each other. It seemed to Maggie that Jasmine's face was already beginning to assume the uninteresting expression which characterised those of the girls of the school.

Prayers began and came to an end. Mrs Howgate conducted them on that occasion. There was something in the arresting voice of the headmistress which struck even on Maggie's wayward heart. She only repeated one collect and the Lord's Prayer; but that collect was the superb one ordained for use on Advent Sunday: 'Give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light.' Maggie did not know then, nor for a long time afterwards, why a queer, pricking sensation came at the back of her eyes, or why an emotion she had never felt before filled her heart. She looked up at that moment and encountered the gaze of Jasmine. A thrill went through her. Jasmine had not forgotten her; she loved her still. The girl felt strangely soothed. She rose from her knees with the dawn of a resolution in her heart; but she did not herself even know that it was there.

Poor Maggie! she had need of resolution that

morning, for it was truly to be one of humiliation for her.

Family prayers were, of course, immediately followed by lessons. The girls went into the schoolroom and sat down at their respective desks, and Mrs Howgate took her new pupils into her own special study. There she first questioned Maggie and then Jasmine with regard to their respective attainments. Alack and alas for Miss Simpson! Miss Simpson's teaching had not been thorough, and Maggie, as far as real learning was concerned, had practically taught herself the little she knew. Mrs Howgate did not put her new pupil through any severe tests. A question asked here, a remark uttered there, convinced her of the truth. She asked Maggie to sit down by the open window, and then questioned Jasmine. The girl who had been taught thoroughly, slowly, day by day by such a man as Professor Primrose had a very different degree of attainment. It is true she only knew the capitals of Europe by repute, and certainly would have failed in an examination on the fine arts of so-called society. But as far as her education went, it was complete in itself.

When Mrs Howgate had finished catechising both her pupils she rang the bell. A servant appeared.

'Ask Miss Dunn to come here,' she said.

In a minute or two Miss Dunn entered the room.

'Miss Dunn,' said the head-mistress, 'will you have the goodness to put Jasmine Primrose into your first class for literature, science, classics, and French? I also understand from you that her needlework is good?'

'Excellent,' said Miss Dunn.

'Take her away with you, please.'

'And what about Margaret Massereene?' asked Miss Dunn.

'I will talk to you about her later on.'

The governess and Jasmine left the room together. It seemed to Maggie that Jasmine's soft eyes were glowing with a sort of triumph, and that she was holding her head very erect. When the door closed behind the two Mrs Howgate turned to her other pupil.

'Your friend is a very nice girl. She is the daughter of Professor Primrose. She has had great advantages. Now, I want to speak to you very seriously.'

'Yes,' said Maggie.

'You have come here to be under my charge for a time. I know all the circumstances of your coming.'

'You know them! What do you mean?'

'You and Jasmine Primrose chose—if I may so express it—to take the bit between your teeth. You exerted yourselves to promote a friendship which was, in fact, not desired by Jasmine's father. You shall have your friend, Margaret

Massereene, but you must earn her friendship, and you yourself, I grieve to say, must take the lowest place.'

'What do you mean?'

'You have been taught, my dear, but not according to my ideas. You must begin at the beginning.'

'I—I don't understand.'

'You will soon. The whole thing remains with yourself. There are two other girls in the school, and only two, as absolutely ignorant as you are. You will take your English lessons with them, and your French lessons. You will sit in the same form. They will be your companions. It will be slightly bitter for you to be the associate of girls younger than you are in years, but it remains altogether with yourself whether you pass them quickly or not. You are backward—you are so hopelessly backward that, according to my ideas, you know nothing. You must unknow what little you have been taught. You cannot even read aloud correctly. You do not attend to the rules of punctuation, and, above all things, you do not take in the sense of what you read.'

'Miss Simpson used to say that I read well.'

Maggie remembered that morning when she read Macaulay's account of the siege of Londonderry.

'That is because you are gifted with imagination. Now, I don't wish for a single moment to

over-depress you, but you have come here to be thorough. Thoroughness is not one of your characteristics. You must be thorough, you understand, for there is no use whatever in my trying to build up knowledge on a wrong foundation. At present you are very far from being humble. You must learn humility. Think meekly of yourself and much of your fellow-pupils.

'Your lessons will not be difficult, but I expect them to be thoroughly learned. I expect you to conform to all rules; I expect you to be pleasant with the girls who are in your class. There are only two, Annie Cooper and Mary Frost. They are slow, whereas you are quick. They lack imagination, whereas you have too much. They are very gentle, whereas you are full of fire. You can soon leave them behind, or, if you are really noble, you can carry them along with you. Much depends on the next month. If you behave well you go home for the holidays; but—and I may as well tell you at once—it is both Mr Primrose's and your mother's wish that neither you nor Jasmine return to your respective homes until the winter. The wish of your parents is that you should spend these holidays with me. They will not be unpleasant even then; but in that matter you are allowed to exercise your own will, unless indeed you do something which merits the punishment of staying at school during the holidays.'

As Mrs Howgate uttered the last words she rose and rang the bell. Miss Dunn again appeared.

'Miss Dunn, will you kindly place Margaret Massereene in the same class with Mary Frost and Annie Cooper. Make things as pleasant as you can for all three girls.—And now, go, my dear.'

'Oh, I am so hungry!' said Maggie, with a groan.

'Your bread is waiting for you,' said Miss Dunn in a grim tone.

She took Maggie's hand and led her from the room.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW WAY OUT.

IN a fortnight's time Maggie Massereene would have scarcely known herself. In appearance she was a subdued, very neat-looking, remarkably plain girl. She talked of her hair as glue; so much vaseline was employed in keeping it in order that it seemed to stick to her head. She alluded to her brain as 'mere pap.' She thought of herself as a person without the smallest individuality. In private she sulked; in public she was silent, never making herself agreeable, never joining in the play of her companions. There was only one person in the school whom she really desired, and that person was Jasmine Primrose.

The thought of Jasmine, however, was now far from pleasing to her. She was visited by alternate fits both of hate and love for her chosen friend. While she was doing so remarkably badly, associating, as she expressed it, with two dunces of the most colourless type imaginable, Jasmine was steadily making her way in the school.

Jasmine seemed to be the sort of girl who could bend her own will to the stronger will of

another. Her very hair obeyed the mandates of Howgate Manor. It lay flat and smooth against her pretty head without the aid of vaseline or any other pomade. Her brown dress seemed quite to become her. She was so pretty in herself that even the hideous uniform of the school did not destroy her good looks.

Then she was so clever! She was not only in the head-class, but at the very top of that class. She was modest too. There was not a trace of pride or vainglory about her. From her position as very nearly head-girl of the school—for even Susan Welsh was not nearly so well informed as Jasmine—she looked at poor Maggie in her humiliating position as the lowest girl of all. Her eyes expressed a world of sympathy; but now Maggie could not meet those eyes. She turned away, pretending that Jasmine had also forsaken her, and that Jasmine was unworthy. The bitterness of her feelings can be better imagined than described.

The life at Howgate Manor was certainly, to a girl who had hitherto lived free as the air, who had travelled a great deal, who had at all times been surrounded by luxuries, the most aggravating that could be imagined. The ugly dress, the very plain food, the severely dull lessons and routine which never varied from day to day, the sense of imprisonment, and, above all

things, the complete loss of that friendship for which Maggie had really come to the school, chafed her proud spirit until she scarcely knew herself. She wanted to get ill. She wanted anything to happen rather than that her present existence should continue. But, try as she would, the keen air at Howgate Manor gave her such an appetite that the once despised mutton and turnips, roast-beef and potatoes, were eaten with relish, and even the stale bread-and-butter and milk-and-water were ever welcome; while at night she slept like any top. So that illness, court it as she might, would not visit her.

Her simple lessons were easily learned. She was not exactly rude to her companions—for rudeness would have meant punishment—but she ignored them. In consequence they disliked her, and left her to shift for herself, except during lesson hours.

Meanwhile, Jasmine progressed in her friendship with Agnes Powell. The girls in the higher classes of the school considered it beneath them to talk to girls of the lower classes. Small as the school was, it was very tenacious of certain traditions. Maggie —tall, ungainly, no longer in the least attractive-looking—was regarded as the dunce of the school. In consequence she ought to have been glad to receive the notice of even such insignificant people as Annie Cooper and Mary Frost. But neither Annie Cooper nor Mary Frost wanted Maggie's

society, and accordingly the unhappy child was left a good deal to herself.

One day Jasmine did such a daring thing as to walk right across the playground, come up to her old friend, and take her by the arm.

'I can't stand this any longer,' said Jasmine; 'come and walk with me for a little in the paddock.'

Maggie was about to refuse, but the hunger in her eyes badly concealed the sense of starvation in her heart. A lump rose into her throat; she followed Jasmine without a word.

'Are we alone?' she said with a gasp. 'Is there anywhere in this odious place where we can be quite by ourselves?'

'I cannot stay long,' said Jasmine. 'I have promised Agnes Powell to help her to arrange our recitation for to-night; but I want to be with you for ten minutes, I have so much to say.'

'Ten minutes,' gasped Maggie, 'when I am starving for you! You have forgotten me; you are faithless. I knew you would be.'

'No, Maggie,' said Jasmine, 'that is not true; I think of you always. This school is a very peculiar place, but there is good in it. I did wrong to want to be with you when father forbade it. We are each of us being punished for what happened then.'

'*You* punished?' interrupted Maggie. 'Why,

you are petted and fussed over and made practically the head-girl of the school; even that horrid Susan Welsh is nowhere beside you. And you are pretty, too; your hair does not need to be vaselined.'

'Nor would yours if you brushed it enough.'

'Oh, don't talk to me!' said Maggie, shaking herself away from Jasmine's detaining arm; 'I want to be a fright. This school will never do me any good. I was bad enough at home; here I am quite a dreadful girl.'

'I want to say something,' said Jasmine in an eager voice. 'I have been questioning girls who know. The school is peculiar; it tries me, and it must try you infinitely more. But you are quite acknowledged to be clever, and you can work your way up. Will you? Won't you? You can soon reach my standard. Why, Maggie, I am nothing in reality beside you. You have got real talent; I have only just got—oh—acquirements. I have learned things because they have been forced into me from my earliest days. Miss Simpson was no teacher for you, poor Maggie! I know now how poor and ill-equipped she was for the office which she undertook. You can soon get far ahead of the girls in whose form you are. If there is nothing else to take an interest in here, at least you can take an interest in your learning. And listen; we are going to have a little play in the school, and I

have begged and implored for you to take a part. It will be rather a big part. You are to be a fortune-teller, a gipsy; you will do it so well, even Susan Welsh agreed. We have but to get the leave of Mrs Howgate; then you will be with us once more. Now I must fly.'

Before Maggie could utter a word Jasmine disappeared. Maggie found herself alone in the paddock. Her heart was beating more quickly than it had done since the fatal morning when her twelve sovereigns had been taken from her, and when all hope was over. She pressed her hand against it as though she would quiet it; then she paced slowly up and down. She was glad of her liberty.

Some of the girls were playing different old-fashioned games in a field near by. The summer sun was shining over everything. Even in this wild part of Yorkshire the weather was fine. Maggie wondered what it was like at Castle Mary. She thought of the luxurious rooms; she even remembered the hateful schoolroom, with its hosts of flies and its ugly view. Ah, how soon she could have got out of that and lost herself in the glades of trees which surrounded the old house! How quickly she could have run towards the pine-wood, and through the pine-wood ascended to the hill-top, and found the girl—the one girl —whom she loved!

'She is lost to me,' thought Maggie. 'She is

as different from that runcible girl whom I saw on a certain spring morning as night is different from day. She may become a fine woman in the course of months or years, but she will never be my true friend any more, and I am being ruined—ruined! This is a sort of penal servitude! I don't want to act in their stupid play. Why should I? They have humiliated me to the last degree; they have taken all the spirit out of me. I can't help myself any more.'

As Maggie walked she approached nearer and nearer to the hedge which surrounded the paddock. At this moment she saw staring at her through the hedge a pair of very bright eyes. The eyes were riveted on her face. She gazed at them for a minute in some consternation, and then laughed.

'Why, Priscilla Fullerton,' she said, 'you quite startled me for a minute. What are you doing here?'

'Watching you,' said Priscilla. 'I have been watching you for some time. May I come in and walk with you?'

Maggie said in her abrupt voice, 'I don't care whether you do or not; but I may as well tell you that I am not in a mood to be friendly.'

Priscilla Fullerton, aged fourteen, was one of the middle-girls of the school. She had remarkably bright black eyes, which no amount of ugly

dressing of her person could quench. She was smart and sharp, and more feared than loved by her companions. Up to the present Maggie had not taken the slightest notice of her, but now she thought her an agreeable change from Annie Cooper and Mary Frost.

Priscilla pushed her way through the hedge and came up towards her.

'I admire you very much,' she said at once; 'you are the only girl in the whole school worth her salt. The rest are dummies—or, rather, they are jellies; they have been all boiled down into one consistency and then poured into moulds by Mrs Howgate. She can't boil you down, and I don't think she can boil me down. I see you are remarkably discontented. Of course you are; so am I. Was all your money taken away when you first came to the school?'

'Yes,' said Maggie, in some surprise. 'Was yours?'

'All they could find,' said Priscilla in a guarded tone. She looked behind her as she spoke, and dropped her voice.

'What do you mean by that?' said Maggie, interested on the spot.

'If you will promise not to peach I will tell you something.'

'I never tell tales about people, if that is what you mean,' said Maggie in her proudest tone.

'Oh, come, Miss Defiance, you need not put on those airs; and I am sure I am quite willing to trust you, for you interest me. You and I are the two rebels of the school.'

'I certainly am a rebel,' said Maggie. 'I did not know that you were one; you look proper enough.'

'Have you ever,' said Priscilla, 'read down into the depths of my eyes?'

'I cannot say I have noticed them before.'

'Well, look at them now; they are bright enough, aren't they?'

As Priscilla spoke she turned, and her very black eyes were fixed on Maggie.

'Your eyes are wild too,' said Priscilla, with a laugh. 'We are kindred spirits. I have been watching you from afar. I have watched all the girls as they came one by one. They have succumbed. You have been here three whole weeks —nearly a month—and you have not succumbed a bit. You came with a friend. Her name is Jasmine Primrose; she is as happy as the day is long—of course she is. She has found her niche. She was educated for this school, and this school suits her. Now, I suppose you imagine that by degrees you will get contented here. But I am going to disillusion you. I have been at the school for a year, and I am no more contented now than I was at first. The hateful life is killing me, as it will kill you. There is nothing

left of me but my eyes. When I was in the world I was pretty. I had plenty of hair, all curly and fuzzy, and I had a fairly good figure; and, in short, I was passable, as you, I believe, are passable. Are you really and truly one of those rich Massereenes who live at a place called Castle Mary?'

'Riches don't count here,' said Maggie. 'I only know that people call me Maggie, that I am a prisoner, and one of the most miserable, miserable girls in the world.'

'You need not be miserable long if you will take counsel with me.'

'Why, what can you do?'

'A great deal. Let me confide something to you.'

'What is it?'

'You have promised not to peach?'

'If you are afraid, don't tell me,' was Maggie's answer.

'I feel I must tell you; I must confide in some one. Well, do you know that, having had a sister here before me, I managed not to be denuded of all my possessions when I returned to school at the beginning of last term? It is the custom in this precious place to take the girls' money from them, and all their valuables. That precious Mrs Howgate is in the habit of keeping their money for them, and she returns it faithfully enough when they leave school. But I

have something to tell you which you will not at all like to hear. Probabilities are that you won't be sent home for the holidays.'

'Oh, nonsense!' said Maggie. 'I have done nothing at all naughty. I have tried to keep good on purpose.'

'Poor little you—as if that availed anything! Aren't you in the lowest class?'

'Yes. I don't know why I am; I am not at all stupid.'

'Of course you are not; it is only necessary to look at you to see that you are very clever. But Mrs Howgate will have you taught in her way. Didn't she say to you that you were to unlearn all you used to know? I had a very remarkable French governess before I came here, and didn't she teach me things? Oh, wouldn't my darling proper Mrs Howgate and Miss Dunn be surprised if they knew the sort of things Mademoiselle Arnaud used to impart to me? But that is neither here nor there. The thing that concerns you is this: that Mrs Howgate won't at all want you to go home to your dear, luxurious Castle Mary; and that being the case, she will write to your mother and say that you are exceedingly low down in the school, and that the best thing you can do is to stay here for the holidays.'

'Here for the holidays? Horror!' cried poor Maggie.

'Well, here or somewhere—most likely here.

She will leave you with Miss Dunn, and you will do lessons every day; and, in spite of yourself, you will learn, and perhaps, when we reassemble in the autumn you will be in the form with me. That is the very most you can expect. But now, to tell you the truth, I don't think that good enough either for you or for me, and I have a plan to propose. Are you willing to consider it?'

'What is it?' asked Maggie.

'Well, you see, I have got money; I have got five pounds. I was not such a greenhorn as you were. I didn't leave it tacked inside my corsets. I took it right out and lay on it during the first night at school. I left a little money, just as a sort of blind, in my purse, and tied up in a handkerchief a ring or two—I always wear rings when I am not at school—and that precious Miss Dunn thought there was no more. But I have got five pounds all in precious gold sovereigns, and that money should take us both back to Castle Mary. If you will ensure me a welcome there when I arrive, I will pay for your fare as well as for my own. Your mother is a weak sort of person, isn't she?'

'Why do you say that?' asked Maggie.

'But she is, isn't she? I have learned all about her. I have been working up the whole scheme since you came. I knew about you, of course; we all do learn things at the school. We know

that your pretty friend Jasmine is the daughter of a poor and very learned professor, and that you are the daughter of an exceedingly rich widow; and we know also that you were both sent here because you were naughty, and would be friends with each other. Well, that is all right; that doesn't matter to us at all. I can't see that your friendship makes much progress. I should be a much better friend to you; and if you will only ensure a welcome for me at Castle Mary I can easily talk your mother round. Now, will you do it?'

'Oh—I will—I don't know,' said Maggie. 'You —you agitate me.'

'There is that horrid bell; we must go in to lessons. You will probably be asked to-night to take the part of the fortune-telling gipsy in the play which the school is getting up. Whatever you do, don't refuse; that will be your opportunity. I will speak to you again. I know ways and means. My sister was not at the school before me for nothing. Mrs Howgate may be clever, but she is not so clever as Priscilla Fullerton when she has got five pounds in her pocket.'

Priscilla vanished, not by the ordinary way out of the paddock, but through the hedge. She was seen presently entering the house in company with one of the girls in her own class; and Maggie walked demurely, with Annie Cooper at one side of her, and Mary Frost at the other. The

three girls took their places at their respective desks and began their afternoon's work.

But Maggie's head was whirling. To be deprived of her hope for the greater part of a month, and then all of a sudden to see in the distance the possibility of an open door, almost intoxicated her. Once back at Castle Mary, she could manage—oh yes, she could manage. Jasmine, her dear friend, her darling, was, after all, doing nothing for her. At the school they were, in reality, as far apart as though the poles divided them; and there was Priscilla Fullerton.

Maggie did not like Priscilla. There was something about her own nature which was truly above-board and honourable. She could not for very long brook subterfuge and dishonour. But this girl seemed her only means of escape, and she would cling to her now at any cost.

'How rosy you are!' said Annie Cooper in a timid voice, for both she and her companion were rather afraid of Maggie. 'This place must agree with you very well.'

'Of course it does,' replied Maggie, speaking in the most execrable French; for no other tongue was allowed during week-day hours in the school but French or German. 'I have developed a huge appetite, I can tell you, and I only wish it was tea-time.'

Annie gave a sigh, laughed, and bent again over her book.

'I wish I understood this,' she said, with a pout.

Maggie went on writing diligently; her work, simple as it was, had been unpleasant to her until this moment. But on this occasion it seemed to her that fresh doors of intelligence were opened in her brain. She soon got through her lesson, and even condescended to help Mary Frost a little with hers.

Mary Frost was one of those hopeless girls who, without being exactly deficient, are next door to it. Maggie gave her the necessary information with regard to the formation of a French sentence. Mary rewarded her with an adoring look. Poor Mary could have been Maggie's slave on the spot; but Maggie had no wish for such homage.

'For goodness' sake don't fall in love with me!' she said. 'I just happen to be in a fairly good temper for the time being, but I will be worse than ever to-morrow. Ah, there is the bell for tea! I never did suppose that thin bread-and-butter and that horrid milk-and-water could be so agreeable.'

The girls filed into the refectory. As Maggie ate her portion and drank her milk-and-water she found herself again close to Priscilla. Priscilla managed to say, 'I will walk with you to-morrow in the paddock,' and then immediately darted away to talk to a companion in her own class.

But this whisper seemed to lay an unquiet spirit in Maggie's heart, and she made herself quite agreeable to her companions, causing one or two of them to laugh and look at her with a new surprise and interest. Just before prayers that evening Mrs Howgate announced that the girls who belonged to the first two forms in the school were going to prepare a little play which they were to perform in the presence of the few friends who would come to the school on breaking-up day.

'Contrary to most schools, we do not make this an occasion for great display,' said Mrs Howgate. 'Such a proceeding would be contrary to the rules of the school. But our wish is to encourage talent of every kind; and although there will be no parents, some people from the neighbourhood have been invited to witness the play. It is quite a simple thing. The name is *The Magic Circle.* I have read it; it is a little old-fashioned, but it is none the worse for that. Year by year we have either *tableaux vivants* or a play on the auspicious occasion of the break-up. This year Susan Welsh, Jasmine Primrose, and other girls of the first class have elected to perform *The Magic Circle,* and—the greatest innovation of all—I am permitting Jasmine Primrose to invite one girl from the lower school to take part in the performance.—Margaret Massereene, you, owing to your appearance, are allowed to

be the gipsy on the occasion. Come forward, please.'

Maggie left her place beside Mary Frost and Annie Cooper. She walked almost unsteadily up the room. She found herself close to Jasmine. Jasmine put out her hand, touched Maggie, then drew it back again. There was comfort and strength in the contact.

There were now six girls in all elected to take part in *The Magic Circle.* What the play was about, how it was to be performed, what the characters were to do, Maggie had not the slightest idea.

Mrs Howgate continued: 'There is still a whole month between now and the break-up, and during that time those girls who are to perform in the play will be allowed a half-holiday twice a week, in which they can either meet in the paddock if the weather is fine, or in my private lecture-room if it is wet, in order to rehearse their parts. The rest of the school are to have nothing whatever to do with the play. They are on no account to listen to the rehearsals. The play is to be entirely arranged by the girls themselves without any help from outsiders. I think that is best. Margaret Massereene, return to your place; Jasmine Primrose, do likewise.'

Prayers immediately followed, and then the girls trooped up to bed. But that night Maggie had something to dream about as she slept. She

was a gipsy in the play. She was more; she was a runaway, going home as fast as the train could take her to Castle Mary. Priscilla Fullerton was by her side; Jasmine was somewhere—she could not quite make out where—close, and yet far, very far away. The dream was all confusion. It hurt more than it gave her pleasure.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

WHETHER what immediately followed would have taken place must always remain doubtful had Maggie gone home in the ordinary course of events for her holidays. She might, in that case, never have been drawn into the despairing expedient of trying to run away. But when the play, *The Magic Circle*, was half-way towards completion, when each girl had been given her part, and when Maggie's own rendering of the fortune-telling gipsy received the cordial plaudits of her companions, a bolt dropped from the blue.

Maggie was becoming almost interested, almost happy. The regularity of her life, the wholesomeness of her plain food, the fact that she was in radiant health, could not but improve her spirits. The play, too, stimulated her, taking her from the company of dull Mary Frost and deficient Annie Cooper. For so many hours twice a week, when she was rehearsing, she was in the company of her peers. Nay, more, she was in a position to show her own rather remarkable talent. The girl was full of imagination.

She could act with spirit and fire. She could throw herself into her part, and forget herself. Her appearance had been the first thing in her favour. Even the most prejudiced girl in the school had to admit that Maggie's black hair and wide, saucer brown eyes were gipsy-like in character.

Jasmine had pleaded for her, and Jasmine was already such a favourite in the school that what she said was listened to with respect. Maggie turned out even a greater success than Jasmine's prognostications had given the other girls reason to expect. She not only played the part well, but she played it as though she were the part itself. She was no longer Maggie Massereene, but the pretty, fancifully dressed gipsy who could interpret the future and tell the true story of *The Magic Circle*. Hers was, in reality, one of the powerful parts of the play, and it was a source of intense rejoicing to her to realise that for one evening at least it would be right for her hair to be wild and disorderly, right for her to wear a red bodice and short skirt, and, in short, to be as grotesque in appearance as she possibly could.

'Oh! it is delightful to get rid of the shackles,' she could not help saying; and her step grew light as she thought of the evening of triumph which lay before her, the eyes of approval which must follow her every movement, the applause

even of that poor circle of friends who would congregate at the Manor School to see the little performance.

But the bolt was in the blue, and it would fall. The play was intended to take place on the 20th of July. Then came the prize-giving and the reading of the essays, and afterwards the girls would disperse, going to their different homes. Maggie therefore felt that it would be unnecessary for her to prosecute her friendship with Priscilla Fullerton, a girl whom she both liked and disliked. She had rather shunned Priscilla of late, although Priscilla had continued to watch her with bright eyes.

On a certain day, about a fortnight before the play was to be acted, Mrs Howgate met Maggie going in the direction of the paddock.

'My dear,' she said, 'I wish to speak to you for a minute or two.'

Maggie paused rather unwillingly.

'I am in a hurry,' she said. 'They are all waiting. There is to be a dress rehearsal to-day.'

'They—of course you allude to your schoolfellows; permit me to remark that it is a very loose way of speaking the king's English—must wait *my* pleasure,' said Mrs Howgate. 'Come in here, Margaret. I have something to say to you.'

Maggie felt her spirit going down and down. She followed Mrs Howgate into the lecture-room. The head-mistress closed the door behind her.

Maggie was holding in her little hand the red cap and red skirt and a few other properties which belonged to the rôle of the gipsy.

'Put those things down,' said Mrs Howgate. Maggie obeyed. 'I think it only right to tell you, Margaret,' said Mrs Howgate, 'that I have just completed arrangements with your good mother which will enable me to have the pleasure of your company during the holidays.'

'Oh no, no!' said Maggie, her face turning white.

'I am sorry for your disappointment, my child, but I do this for your eventual good. You will learn to thank me some day. I propose to spend the holidays here. Miss Dunn will be with me, and also Mary Frost. Mary Frost's mother is not well enough to receive her. We shall, I trust, be a happy little party. My principal desire in keeping you here is to personally superintend your studies. That I can scarcely do while I have the charge of thirteen other girls. Mary Frost will be Miss Dunn's charge; you will be mine. Don't ask for reasons, my child; the matter is settled. Your mother is very pleased.'

'And,' said Maggie, speaking with very white lips, 'is Jasmine Primrose going home?'

'Certainly she is. An excellent girl, and high up in the school. She goes back to her father—to the hill-top I think they call it—for the summer

holidays; but she will return in the autumn. I trust by that time that you may be in a very different class from the one in which you are now placed in the school. Understand, Margaret, once and for all, that you have plenty of talent, but that your ignorance is lamentable. I want especially to combat that, and feel that even the deprivation of a few weeks' holiday ought to be cheerfully borne by you when so great a result is to be achieved. There is no use in struggling. Go now, and perform your part in *The Magic Circle*. Let me have no murmurings, no discontent. You will attain nothing by this line of conduct, and only render yourself unhappy.'

As Mrs Howgate spoke she opened the door, and Maggie passed out. The day was a beautiful one. The sun shone brilliantly; all creation seemed to rejoice. But there was one miserable, defiant, defeated girl who thought that her heart would break. The sunshine was a mockery to her; life was intolerable. What—oh, what was she to do? She longed to scream aloud. Of one thing, at least, she was resolved: she would not join her companions in the paddock. What was the use of showing off her talent on that tiny arena, that little stage of her school-life? She would show Mrs Howgate once and for all that hers was a will that could never be broken, that her present conditions would ruin her.

'This life will kill me!' she thought. 'I shall die of it! I shall die of it!'

She put up her hands to her plastered locks. She could not even tear her hair. In every way she was fettered. She gave a great sob, and went out into the sunshine. Oh, if only she could be alone! But everywhere girls were to be seen, those girls who were not to join in the play, pacing about in twos and threes, doubtless talking about their holidays. The girls of Howgate Manor never talked of anything but their holidays. One family was going to Scarborough; another to Brighton; another all the way down to Devonshire; another, again, to Normandy; but all were going to be jolly, merry, free, happy. Mary Frost passed by in company with her chosen friend Annie Cooper. Maggie shouted to Mary:

'So you too are to be cooped up here for the holidays. Aren't you mad? Why don't you rave and tear your hair?'

Mary Frost looked at her with grave surprise.

'I shall quite enjoy it,' she said. 'Miss Dunn is going to teach me. She is going to give me special lessons every day. The holidays at home are always dull. I much prefer to stay at school.'

'Oh, you imbecile!' said Maggie. She turned away with a frown.

At that moment Priscilla Fullerton came up.

'Where in the world have you been?' she said. 'We are all waiting for you. What is wrong?'

'Everything is wrong,' said Maggie. 'I have just seen Mrs Howgate, and she says I am not to go home for the holidays. She has heard from mother I am to stay here. I shall go mad! I know I shall!'

'No, you won't, dear; and you won't stay here either. Now, listen. I am coming to your room to-night. I shall make a little scratching noise something like a mouse. You will not know me from the tiniest mouse that ever lived, and I will manage to get into the room; and you mustn't speak or utter a sound, only just make way for me in your bed, and I will lie down by you, and tell you my plans. I guessed all along you would not be allowed to go home for the holidays. Well, never mind; you have got Priscilla Fullerton as your friend.'

'Oh, indeed, indeed, you are, if you help me out of this!' said poor Maggie.

'Help you?' said Priscilla. 'I will help you and myself also. Now, come along. Be merry; be cheerful; everything depends on your putting a brave front on things. Don't show that you are a scrap disappointed. You must act the part of the gipsy well—better than well. Cheer up; I am on your side. As to that Jasmine of yours, I don't think she is worth her salt. Why

should she go home and leave you behind? And why should that horrid Agnes Powell go with her?'

'Is Agnes Powell going back with Jasmine—going back to the hill-top?' said Maggie, with a gasp.

'Yes, it is all settled; you ask Jasmine herself.'

'I don't believe it. I can't.'

'Well, ask her. But come, do come; they are so impatient to begin.'

The rehearsal took place. The girls all played their parts fairly well. Even Maggie roused herself with an effort, and was an audacious and fascinating gipsy. If there was a cloud of sorrow behind her bright eyes, it but added to their effect. If there was a pain gnawing at her heart, it gave pathos to her pretty voice. The girls cheered and applauded, and Maggie's versatile spirits rose; but, added to the demon of rage and disappointment, another demon had now taken possession of her heart. Was it possible that Jasmine was transferring her affections from her, Maggie Massereene, to so commonplace and every-day a girl as Agnes Powell? Priscilla had said so, but Priscilla must be wrong. It was dreadful enough to think of Jasmine going home crowned with honour, having taken a high place in the school. It was awful to think of Jasmine leaving her behind; but if, in addition, Jasmine took a schoolfellow with her, who was supposed to be

her special friend, then, indeed, Maggie's cup of bitterness would be full to the brim.

She felt more angry about this than she did about the fact that she herself was to be imprisoned at the Manor.

When the play had come to an end, and the girls were changing their dresses for their usual everyday toilet, Maggie went up to Jasmine.

'Have you heard the news?'

'What news?' asked Jasmine. 'Oh Maggie, you do Mariana so beautifully!'

'Never mind about Mariana now. I want to ask you if you know.'

'What? Maggie, you look queer.'

'I feel queer. I have just seen Mrs Howgate. Mrs Howgate is a beast—a horror!'

'Oh no, no,' said Jasmine. 'She is a good woman.'

'Then I hate and loathe good women! Do you know what she has done? She has written to mother, and mother has consented. Of course mother would consent. Catch mother troubling herself much about any one! I am not to go home for the holidays! Do you know?'

'Mrs Howgate told me that it might be so. She spoke to me about it. She said that it would be good for you.'

'Oh, as if I care for things that are good for me!'

'Dear Maggie'——

'*Don't* call me dear Maggie! Your conduct to me since I came here has been detestable!'

'I?' said Jasmine, her eyes filling with tears. 'I can't help it. I am more, more than sorry, but you must realise that I am powerless.'

'I can't and won't realise it. Anyhow, there is no good talking about it. I am to stay here, and you are to go. They pet you, and fuss over you, and think you a genius. You are no cleverer than I am.'

'I am not half as clever,' said Jasmine.

'Oh—there! Don't go to the other extreme; you know perfectly well that you are. But that is neither here nor there. You go home—my friend for whose sake I was sent here—and I stay behind to be in misery—in absolute misery.'

'You will learn so very much, and it will soon be over,' said Jasmine.

'It is easy for you to talk like that. I would rather die than live. I am the most wretched girl in existence. Oh, there is that bell! I am so wretched I am not even hungry. There is one more thing I must say: are you, Jasmine, going to add to all my other miseries by taking that horrid, detestable, priggish Agnes Powell with you?'

Jasmine smiled very gently.

'Why do you put on that detestable smile? There is nothing of the runcible girl left about

you. But answer my question. Is she going with you?'

'Yes, she is coming, because'——

But Jasmine never added any more, for Maggie had turned—turned in a blind fury—and rushed from the paddock.

CHAPTER VIII

SEVERE SCHOOLING.

MAGGIE scarcely knew her own feelings. She was only aware that she felt, as many another disconsolate girl had felt before her, that all the world was against her; that she was of no importance to anybody; that her mother had forsaken her, and not only her mother, but her friend—her own familiar friend, whom she trusted. What would she not have done for Jasmine? And yet Jasmine was going home—home with another companion; home to the hill-top, to be forgiven for her naughtiness, to be petted and fussed about, to enjoy that superb air, to live with her sisters Violet and Daisy, to receive further instruction from that learned Professor, to perhaps—who could say?—visit the plain; to have, in short, a royal time; of course, to forget her. She was to be alone with her misery; for how could she count Mrs Howgate and Miss Dunn as her friends? And as to that terrible Mary Frost, the creature was too stupid for Maggie even to consider.

In the first blind fury of her emotion, Maggie forgot that alternative which Priscilla held out.

But that night, as she lay upon her bed in the dark, it returned to her, and showed some dazzling prospects. She had not the least idea how the escape was to be effected. The guardians of the school were vigilant as any jailers. They allowed no open doors, no freedom, no access to the outside world. Nevertheless, Priscilla seemed confident. If only they could get away, if only they could once find themselves in the train and reach Castle Mary before they were followed, Maggie felt, somehow, that all would be well.

She would, of course, be in disgrace. Even Mrs Howgate would never receive back again to her select establishment a girl who had broken all her rules and run away. Moreover, she would have to keep Priscilla by hook or by crook. Priscilla would be, for the time being at least, a member of the home establishment, and Maggie would, once and for all, have to give up Jasmine. Yes, that would be rather hard, for notwithstanding Jasmine's conduct since they both arrived at the school, she still loved her first great friend. But if she ran away, if she in very truth took the bit between her teeth, then Jasmine would be one of the people who would from henceforth be excluded from her friendship. Jasmine would despise her. Even Maggie herself had not disliked the idea of going to the school more than Jasmine had done. Nevertheless, Jasmine had

submitted. She had, in a sort of fashion, won her laurels. She was acting as a good girl. Goodness shone out of her tranquil eyes and smiled round her lips.

'Oh, detestable!' thought angry Maggie. 'Why did she not fight and struggle as I have fought and struggled? Why did she submit so easily? Well, let her go; she is not worth bothering about. She won't be my friend any more; let her go—let her go!'

Maggie turned violently to the other side of the bed. She pressed her hot cheek against the cool pillow, and the pillow itself seemed to grow hot. She removed a blanket, but still she felt restless and feverish for sleep. Of course she would let Jasmine go. The hill-top girl would no longer have a place in her life. Of course she did not care. Nevertheless, she knew well in her heart of hearts that she did care most intensely; that her feelings were in such a bruised and distressed state, that her affections were so ruthlessly torn up by the roots, that she could have crept to Jasmine's feet and flung her arms round the said feet, and said, 'Let me lie in the dust by you; only keep me near you.'

Towards morning she fell asleep. She awoke with a headache, and went downstairs ill-disposed for her daily routine. But that very day of severe routine was her best medicine. It taught her self-control in spite of herself. The plain

food could not disagree; the healthy lessons could not weary; the enforced exercise could but stimulate. By dinner-time the girl was ravenous; by tea-time she was laughing again; by bed-time she felt much as usual.

There was no rehearsal of *The Magic Circle* that day, and in consequence Maggie had not, up to the present, a moment to be alone with Priscilla. But that evening, as she was bending over her exercise-book, which in truth was disgracefully untidy and much disfigured by blots, she suddenly perceived that some one other than Mary Frost or Annie Cooper sat down near her, and that a hand touched hers. She looked round to encounter Priscilla's black eyes.

'I have it all settled,' she said. 'If you are game enough, you have got to follow me immediately after you have played the part as the gipsy fortune-teller.'

Maggie looked anxiously round the room. There was not a soul in sight. She had been later than the others over her exercise. In a minute or two the refectory bell would ring for supper. Priscilla said in a low tone:

'I have the money, and I have made all the plans. You are willing to come, are you?'

'Yes,' said Maggie.

'Clearly understand one thing,' continued Priscilla, 'that if we fail we may as well go to prison at once.'

'I know that,' said Maggie. 'Is there any danger?'

'None if you are plucky.'

'I have pluck enough, I assure you.'

'Then that is all right. I pay our fares to London, and from London to your home. You take me on for the holidays. We won't ever be allowed to come back here. You make my peace with your mother.'

'I can manage that,' said Maggie.

'I won't spend my money on you unless you swear to me that you will do it.'

'Yes, I swear. What more do you want?'

'This,' said Priscilla. 'You will give up henceforth Jasmine Primrose as your friend, and take me instead.'

'Oh,' said Maggie, 'I didn't bargain for that.'

'All right,' said Priscilla, moving a little away from her; 'you can spend your holidays here. They will be precious dull, I can tell you. And I will take my five pounds with me and go home. I'll have a jolly lot of fun in the vacation with five pounds to spend. We are all going to some seaside place—Margate, Ramsgate, or somewhere of that sort. We'll sit on the sands and listen to the band. We'll enjoy ourselves splendidly.'

Maggie looked at her. It occurred to Maggie at that moment that the girl who proffered her friendship instead of Jasmine's was vulgar and

commonplace; that she, Maggie, had not one thing in common with her.

'Think,' said Priscilla eagerly, 'what school will be like with only Mrs Howgate and Miss Dunn and that Mary Frost—a girl who is almost half-witted.'

'She cannot help being stupid. Look here,' said Maggie eagerly, 'we have hardly a minute to talk, but your conditions are too hard. I will ask mother to keep you with us for the holidays. As to anything further, I don't see how I can manage it. I don't, really. I won't give up Jasmine.'

'All right, then, the thing is off,' said Priscilla.

The bell sounded; Priscilla darted away. Maggie went into the refectory. As she ate her bread-and-butter, and drank her milk much diluted with water, she looked round at her companions. By this time she had come to see a difference in their faces; not even the ugly brown uniform and the closely plastered hair could destroy individuality. Jasmine, amongst the other girls, stood out as one of the purest of all pure pearls, so refined was her appearance, so gracious her bearing, so intellectual her fine forehead. Jasmine, of course, had not been very good; but her naughtiness had entirely been caused by her love for Maggie. Jasmine had submitted since she went to the school, whereas Maggie had rebelled. It was right that Maggie should be punished; it was right that Jasmine should be re-

warded. Oh, yes, yes! But then Maggie, in her present mood, hated things that were right. She wanted to do wrong. She wanted to defy tradition. She wanted to fly in the face of discipline. She wanted to prove to all her little world that she, Maggie Massereene, could not, would not be coerced. Even the Manor School, that prison of all schools, could not hold her in thrall. Would she, however, for the sake of these things, give Jasmine up? She looked from Jasmine to Priscilla. Priscilla had a dainty air and dancing black eyes. She must at first sight attract; but to know her a little better was but to prove her commonness.

Now, Maggie, with all her faults, was a lady. Her sisters, although they were both of them the very essence of commonplace decorum, were ladies also. But Priscilla belonged to a different order of being. Was Maggie to present this girl to her mother as her chosen friend, and tell her mother that in future she wished to give up the hill-top girls and to take this creature as her boon companion? No, no; she could not do it.

As these thoughts rushed through her brain she noticed that Priscilla was looking at her. Priscilla's eyes seemed to mock her. She went to bed very tired. Jasmine had not spoken to her once during the whole day. The next day came a rehearsal of the great play. Maggie performed her part ill. She was blamed by her companions. What ailed their Gipsy Queen? Where had her fire vanished

to? She spoke out at last in a moment of intense irritation:

'Oh, what is the good? Only the merest old fogies will see me, and when it is over I shall have to stay on at the Manor, away from you all, alone—quite alone, during the long summer days—worse than alone, indeed, for I shall have that detestable Mrs Howgate and that appalling Miss Dunn to keep me company.'

'To say nothing of Mary Frost,' laughed a voice in her ears; and, turning, Maggie saw that Priscilla had entered the paddock.

'Priscilla, you have no right here,' said one of the girls who was taking part in the play.

Priscilla vanished, but her mocking laugh seemed still to echo in the air. The next morning Maggie got into very bad repute in the school. She had absolutely refused to learn the very simple lesson set her, declaring that she knew it already, and would not be bothered to write an essay upon it. Mary Frost and Annie Cooper both brought their badly written and badly conceived essays to Miss Dunn, but Maggie's book was blank.

'What is the reason of this?' said Miss Dunn, opening Maggie's book and turning her surprised, cold eyes full upon the girl.

'The reason is simple enough,' said Maggie. 'I had nothing commonplace enough to say.'

'You are exceedingly impertinent. You surely can say something with regard to happiness.

Happiness is the subject of the paper. You can write about it.'

'I can't,' replied Maggie in her most flippant and insolent tone, 'because since I came to this school I have forgotten the meaning of the word.'

She spoke in a loud, ringing voice, and, looking round her as she spoke, caught the eye of Priscilla. Priscilla never smiled, but Maggie laughed out.

'Shall I tell you again, Miss Dunn, why I did not write the essay?' The angry girl's voice was quite strident now, and even Jasmine, who was standing not very far away, turned and looked at her. 'I did not write on happiness because you and your tribe have destroyed it. I don't know what it is. Any girl who belongs to the Manor School and chooses to write on that subject from a personal point of view is a humbug. I am no humbug; therefore I refuse to write about what I know nothing of.'

'You will at least clearly understand this,' said Miss Dunn, whose face was very white: 'you see that door. Go to it; open it, and leave the room. Do so immediately.'

Maggie walked out of the room with her head up in the air and her step that of a young savage. Even her ugly dress could not take the spirit from her attitude and bearing. If the girls had dared, they would have cheered the audacious creature. But in the Manor School all rebellious feelings were kept well in check. Jasmine's eyes

filled with tears. She hesitated for a moment; then she went up to Miss Dunn.

'May I follow her? May I speak to her?'

'Certainly not, Jasmine; you forget yourself.—You will excuse me for a minute or two, girls. I must follow your unhappy fellow-pupil. She needs severe punishment for her rebellious words.'

'Oh no!' said Jasmine aloud. 'She needs kindness.'

But Miss Dunn was not in the mood to listen to Jasmine. On the contrary, she paused for a minute to give her pupil a bad mark, which sent Jasmine very low down in her class, and gave her some additional tasks to do at a moment when all her powers were strained to the utmost to keep her position in the school. Had poor Maggie but known that Jasmine stood up for her at that moment, what followed need not have occurred. As it was, Miss Dunn immediately left the room and went into the passage, where she found her pupil. Maggie was standing quite still. She would have liked to run away there and then; but she had no money, and she was wearing the hideous school uniform. She would have been captured and brought back immediately. She stood, therefore, feeling rather pleased with herself than otherwise. She could but be punished.

Miss Dunn went up to her and took her hand.

'Come with me,' she said. A minute later the girl found herself in Mrs Howgate's presence.

The time was now rapidly approaching the grand break-up of the school, and the head-mistress was busy over her weekly accounts. She looked up as Miss Dunn and the naughty girl of the school, as Maggie was universally called, appeared.

'Well, what now?' she said in a rather weary tone.

'I regret to say,' remarked Miss Dunn, 'that Margaret Massereene has behaved with open insurrection, and requires the customary punishment. Will you kindly give an order that she is to undergo solitary confinement until this time to-morrow?'

Mrs Howgate looked at Maggie. Her colourless, expressionless face certainly expressed nothing then. She took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and handed it to Miss Dunn. Miss Dunn said, 'Thank you,' and again taking possession of Maggie's hand, left the room with her.

They immediately went out into the open air.

'Where are you taking me?' said Maggie.

'To undergo your punishment.'

'What is it?'

'Solitary confinement.'

'I am not a prisoner,' said Maggie. 'You daren't treat me as that.'

'It lies with me to determine the length of your punishment,' said Miss Dunn. 'The less you say at present the better for yourself.'

'Very well,' said Maggie. 'I don't care. I prefer

being alone to being one of the idiots who live in this school. You would, if you could, reduce all our brains to pulp; but you will have some trouble with mine, I can tell you.'

By this time they had entered the garden, which was walled in, as, indeed, were all the grounds. It was a pretty little fruit-garden, and peaches were already ripening on the south walls. The time of strawberries was nearly over, but there were raspberry-canes laden with fruit, and currant-bushes bowing under their weight of red currants, and gooseberry-trees that looked quite cool and refreshing. Past all these did Maggie and the governess walk, until at last they reached a building almost in the centre of the garden—a building which Maggie had often noticed with a sort of surprise. She could not imagine what it was there for. The lower part of it, it is true, was used by the girls to keep some of their gardening tools in, their tennis-rackets, and croquet-mallets. But there were some winding stairs, and no one seemed ever to care to go up those stairs.

Miss Dunn now, however, entered this building, and, pushing Maggie in front of her, went up and up the stairs. They reached a room very high up. Miss Dunn opened the door, which was heavily studded with great nails. It had a lock and key and some bolts. There was one window to the room, but that was small and high up. The room itself was absolutely bare of any sort of furniture.

You could not see out of the window, for it was too far above your head, and by no possibility could you reach it.

'Here you stay until you apologise to me,' said Miss Dunn. 'When you are willing to give me a humble apology, and to sit down and write a suitable paper on "Happiness as it is found at Howgate Manor," you will be released—not before.'

'Then I stay here for ever,' said Maggie.

'Very well; you can please yourself about that.'

In a moment the governess had left the room, and locked and bolted the door from without. Maggie had heard her retreating footsteps down the winding, corkscrew stairs. These were followed by silence. In her prison Maggie could not even hear a bird sing or an insect hum. All was still, with a sort of stillness which perhaps the grave might give. At first the passion of rage in the girl's heart kept her from feeling acutely the miserable solitude of her present position, but after a time this state of feeling cooled down. Without fuel anger will not burn, and without hope despair must visit the young heart. Maggie had nothing whatever to do; she had nothing to look at; she had nothing to hope for. The minutes when one endures frightful pain seem as though they would never end; and the minutes when a young heart is torn by a sense of injustice, by a sense of cruel oppression, seem also interminable.

When Maggie had been an hour in her prison

it seemed like three hours; when she had been two hours there she felt as though a whole day had gone by. Besides this, she was seized by the pangs of hunger. Her light breakfast at half-past seven had not prepared her for a very long fast. The bread so eagerly devoured at eleven had not been given to her that morning. She did not know what the time was, but she felt sure the dinner was over. She was so hungry that she began to think about that dinner. It was boiled-mutton day. How eagerly she would have eaten her mutton and finished every turnip, and devoured the unsavoury pudding which followed!

From her situation in this gloomy chamber among the trees in the centre of the fruit-garden, it seemed to her that even school had its delights. Nevertheless, of course she would not submit. She would never write that paper on happiness—that stupid, silly, ridiculous paper. She, Maggie Massereene, had too much spirit for that. Miss Dunn would not dare to kill her. If she was left much longer in this room she would die of hunger.

Oh, what a wretch Jasmine was! Jasmine had seen her go and had not said a word. If Jasmine really loved her she could most assuredly creep up these stairs and whisper to her on the other side of the locked door. But Jasmine was happy with Agnes Powell. Jasmine had forgotten her old friend. Maggie little guessed that poor Jasmine

was kept indoors to get through her troublesome task which her interference on Maggie's behalf had apportioned to her.

Time dragged on. There were no voices in the garden outside, or, if there were, they did not penetrate to Maggie's prison. Time, relentless time, ticked slowly out the measured minutes, and the girl in her prison felt like one possessed. She had alternate periods of frantic rage and rebellion, with dull despair and apathy. She was growing worse and worse. Nothing could ever save her now. Why had God allowed her to be born? What had she done to have to submit to such cruelty as that exercised in the Manor School? Oh, what an impotent, weak, worthless creature she was! She thought of her old days at home, of the luxuries of her life, of Maud Simpson, of her sisters. She would have rejoiced in those tiresome girls at the present moment. Even the ridiculous Laura, with her talk about Mr Grey, would have fascinated her now, and Juliet would have amused her by her pretty airs. Her mother, too, would have been tolerable; and Lord Dunbar—how delightful he would have been! Oh, if only she had listened to Lord Dunbar's words of wisdom! Why had she insisted on having Jasmine as a friend? What dire consequences had followed this friendship! It had seemed so good, so right at the time; but now—but now!

Jasmine was unworthy. All the world was

The next minute a little note was pushed underneath.

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unworthy. Well, people would be sorry for Maggie when they found her dead in this awful prison—for of course she could not live much longer suffering the pangs of such terrible hunger.

She felt faint, and her head throbbed.

Suddenly she remembered that this was one of the rehearsal days. There would be only two more rehearsals, and then the grand play itself—the grand play with poor, wild, rebellious Maggie as the Gipsy Queen—Maggie, with a wreath of red berries round her black hair, in her red jacket and short red skirt. She would come in, her beads tinkling, her words mincing. She would perform her pretty part and win the plaudits of those stupid people who looked on.

Yes, that was the programme. But, after all, what did it matter? For Maggie would not be present to-day. They would have to work without her. Most likely they would get some one else for the Gipsy Queen. Priscilla had black eyes and was smart enough. She was a hateful girl, but she had five pounds. With five pounds Maggie could escape from her prison.

Well, after all, Priscilla was as worthy a friend as Jasmine, and anything in the world would be better than her present position.

Just as these thoughts came to her she heard a sound downstairs, and then there came the faintest of taps at her door, and the next minute a little note was pushed underneath. Maggie flew

to it as the thirsty will to water. She read the following words:

'I am thinking of you, and am so sorry for you. Write the essay at any cost, and beg Miss Dunn's pardon; you will be kept in your prison for days if you don't. Everything will be right on the night of the play. Destroy this; eat it if you can't get rid of it in any other way. Don't betray me. P.'

The words of the note seemed to sink into Maggie's heart. About an hour after she had received her letter, which she had torn into the most minute fragments and pushed down between a crack in the boards, the door was opened and Miss Dunn appeared.

She brought with her a jug of water, a hunch of bread, a pen, ink, and some paper. She was followed by a servant, who brought in a small wooden table and a wooden stool. Without uttering a word, the servant placed the table just under the window, put the stool beside it, laid the writing materials thereon, and then left the room.

Miss Dunn looked at Maggie.

'It is six o'clock,' she said. 'You will have plenty of time to write your essay. I will come back again at eight for it. If it is not written then, you spend the night here. If, on the other hand, it is written, you will come back and join

your companions. Please yourself. If when I return at eight o'clock the essay is not written, you will not be visited until the morning, nor will you have anything more to eat. Think well of what a night in this lonely room will mean to you.'

Without another word, the governess turned, reached the door, unlocked it, locked it again outside, and departed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ESSAY.

MAGGIE sat for ten minutes in absolute silence. She was thinking hard. Then she rose and approached the table, where the jug of water and glass stood, and also the hunch of bread. She tore the bread into fragments, and ate it with a relish which she had never bestowed upon the most delicate morsels at Castle Mary. She drank the water, and felt revived. She then sat down, and calmly and slowly began to write.

'HAPPINESS.

'This is apparently a commonplace theme. It would appear to come into the lives of most people. Young people in particular are supposed to possess it. As we grow older it seems to fly from us. Babies, as a rule, unless they are ill, are always happy. Little children are happy most times; girls are happy at intervals. To be really happy, one must know the meaning of what it is to be unhappy. I, Margaret Massereene, have been requested to write a paper on happiness, and I have come to the conclusion that the way to obtain that most precious possession is to live a

life of self-denial; in short, to discipline one's self. This state of things can be carried to perfection at Howgate Manor. To such a nicety has the fine art of happiness been studied that the plainest food can be eaten with relish. I, personally, have just enjoyed a hunch of stale bread, and much preferred it to *pâté de foie gras.* I have taken a long draught of cold water, and found it preferable to the most delicious iced American drinks which I used to take through a straw in London and Paris.

'The simple life is undoubtedly conducive to happiness, and the simple life is found in all integrity at Howgate Manor. We are taught in this most estimable establishment how to do without things. Dress is a very great temptation to girls who live in the gay world; but here, in our simple and admirable uniform, we are removed from any desire to excel in that respect. Good looks are also rather disliked than admired. It is considered a great sin at Howgate Manor to have fine hair. It is, therefore, plastered down to the head and dressed in a very tight and orderly fashion.

'What the future will be of those girls who have found their true happiness here it is impossible for me to predict. I might venture to lift the veil a little, and to say things that come into my head; but these things would be undisciplined, and therefore not allowable at the Manor. I

therefore declare that happiness of a sort can be obtained at Mrs Howgate's school.

'MARGARET MASSEREENE.'

Having finished her paper, Maggie folded it up, not even caring to read it over. She found an envelope and slipped it inside. She read some directions on the envelope. These were to the effect that she was to fasten down her paper, write her initials outside, and hand it in that condition to Miss Dunn. She suddenly remembered at the same time that certain essays were to be read aloud on the breaking-up day. The essay on happiness in relation to the life at the Manor was the subject selected. No wonder she had been confined in a solitary chamber when she had expressed such rebellion at the thought of writing it!

Her eyes now sparkled as a fresh idea came to her.

'In for a penny, in for a pound,' was her reflection. She took the essay from its envelope. Hitherto she had restrained herself; now she gave fire to her emotion:

'My prophetic soul sees a picture in the future, and I find, after all, that I must describe it. In it I perceive forms walking dimly; and yet, as I watch them closely, they become real and distinct. They have names written on their

foreheads, and I think I perceive, as they approach, that the names belong to the school. One of the dim forms belongs to Jasmine Primrose. She used to be a hill-top girl, and lived truly on the heights. But in that revelation of her which I perceive in the future, she has had her wings cut, and her spirit curbed, and her aspirations broken. She is much happier without her wings; her lost aspirations she never regrets; her vanished ambitions are forgotten. She is prim and good and proper. She is not the Jasmine of old; but that does not matter. She was trained at Howgate Manor, and she has found what is the elixir of life—Happiness.

'I also see another girl. Her name is Margaret Massereene. She used to be wild of the wild and desperate of the desperate. But she, too, has dropped her mantle of rebellion and her spirit of insubordination, and calmly browses on the verdant pastures which are to be found in the plains of life. She knows nothing of hill-tops or exalted places. She, too, is happy, for she has been trained at the Manor. Hurrah for Howgate Manor! The cultivated and select and commonplace are its pupils. Hurrah for Mrs Howgate and Miss Dunn! May they long prosper; and may English girls thrive under their régime!'

When Miss Dunn appeared at eight o'clock Maggie, with flushed cheeks, held out the envelope.

'I have written my essay,' she said; 'and it is entirely in favour of the school, and on "Happiness at Howgate Manor." May I come out now, and may I have something to eat? I am very, very hungry.'

'Hunger is the universal theme,' was Miss Dunn's remark. 'Yes, you may come out; you have written your paper. I see you have forgotten to put your initials in this corner. This essay will not be read until break-up day.'

Maggie hastily added her initials, and a few minutes later had left her chamber of solitary confinement. The next day she had an opportunity of seeing Priscilla.

'I accept your conditions,' she said. 'Will you arrange how we are to escape on the day of the break-up? I may as well tell you that I have written a paper which will set the whole school on fire, and shall be glad to go before it is read.'

'The play commences the proceedings,' said Priscilla, 'and the reading of the essays aloud ends them. We will go between the two great acts. Leave everything to me. You quite, quite understand my terms: I am your friend from this moment, and you give Jasmine Primrose up.'

'I quite understand,' said Maggie.

'We are all alone at this instant,' said Priscilla. 'Strange that we should ever be alone at the school! Will you kiss me just once? I like you, oh, so much!'

Maggie looked eagerly round, gave Priscilla a hasty kiss on her cheek, and then left her. During the few days which intervened between now and the break-up she had never once an opportunity of seeing Jasmine alone.

At last the morning of the day itself arrived. Maggie had not the slightest idea how she was to escape or what was to happen. Priscilla had said to her:

'The less you know the better for you. When I give you a signal, come. You must trust yourself absolutely to me. I can assure you of one thing: we shall not fail.'

On the morning of the day, therefore, Maggie awoke with a strange sense of mingled excitement and defiance within her. She had fought her fight; she had rebelled to the utmost. To-day her rebellion would be crowned with victory. For the time being she felt like one who trod on air. By this time to-morrow she would be far from the detestable Manor. She would be nearing her home; she would be almost there. Any punishment at home would be light, and even luxurious, compared to what she endured daily at the Manor.

She put on her usual hideous dress and went downstairs. She found herself one of the first in the refectory; but a minute later Jasmine came in. Jasmine went straight up to Maggie.

'I am going home to-morrow. I shall not see you for weeks.'

'As if that mattered,' said Maggie.

'But it does matter,' said Jasmine. Her eyes grew moist, as though the tears were not far away. 'I feel intensely unhappy about you,' she continued a minute later. 'I cannot bear to leave you here.'

'Jasmine,' said Maggie, with a sudden effort, 'I did not mean to say anything to you, but I will now. There was a time when I thought more of you than all the rest of the world; but that time is over. We were both sent to this school to punish us for loving each other, and perhaps with an idea that the school would break our friendship. Well, it has done so, and I want you to know it. You have made another friend at school, and doubtless Agnes Powell will be admitted into your home circle, and will learn to care for your father and your sisters, and will be the better, too, for your influence, Jasmine; for you are a good girl. But I—and please understand it—am no longer your friend. I, too, have made a friend in the school, and she suits me better than you. Now, don't let us say anything more about it. I must keep my head to-day, for I have to act so well that I shall dazzle every one.'

Some other girls and Miss Dunn entered at this moment, and Jasmine had not an opportunity of saying another word to Maggie. Even the usual discipline of the school was slightly relaxed on this special day. In the afternoon the play was to be acted in the paddock, where a miniature stage was

put up, and where seats were provided for a number of visitors. Immediately after the acting there would be tea and games, and the girls would take the visitors round and show them the so-called attractions of the place. Afterwards would come the prize-giving and the reading of the essays. Whichever girl wrote the best essay would obtain the special prize given by no less a person than Mrs Howgate herself.

It was elected by common consent that the girl who read best in the school was to read each essay before the assembled visitors, and that the vote of the majority would give the prize. Jasmine had been taught to read by the Professor, and she, for many reasons, was singled out to perform this office. Maggie had no idea of this when she wrote her extraordinary and careless paper on happiness.

The play went off fairly well. Maggie threw herself into it with the abandon of one who was playing a desperate game. Priscilla, who was one of the spectators, could not take her eyes off the brilliant young gipsy. How glad Maggie was to feel her hair fuzzy and wild and flying about her shoulders as usual! How happy she was to have regained even a sort of freedom! There was a sort of thrill of passion in her words as she came forward and stood for a minute to receive the plaudits of her companions and the visitors.

Mrs Howgate was making mental notes of the girl at that moment. She was thinking to herself,

'How am I ever to get at that wild heart? How am I to subdue that queer nature? How am I to make it at peace with itself?' For Mrs Howgate was a good woman, and her endeavour was to do her very best for the girls committed to her care. But she did not understand Maggie, and was, alas! never likely to.

At last the play came to an end. The Gipsy Queen had been the success of the entertainment. Flatteries poured in upon Maggie like the sweetest incense; all her companions crowded round her.

'But for you, no one would have looked at the thing,' said one girl.

'You ought to go on the stage,' said a grave, elderly man, looking full into the girl's dark eyes.

Maggie glanced up at him. He reminded her of Lord Dunbar. She felt a pain at her heart.

'Do you really mean that?' she said.

'No, I don't,' he replied at once; 'and I cannot think why I said it. You ought not to go on the stage; but you have histrionic talent. You have great talent in many directions. See that you use it well.'

'My people are rich. I wish I were poor and could earn my own living,' said the girl impulsively. Then she added, looking full into his face, 'I don't know you at all, but I am a very unhappy girl. I am not what I seem.'

'A great many young people talk like that, my dear,' he answered kindly. 'They have not yet

touched the tragedies of life. But try to cultivate a cheerful spirit. It is, believe me, a continual feast.'

He patted her on her dark head, and, moving a little away, began to talk to other people who were present.

What followed immediately afterwards Maggie never quite remembered. There was confusion, and yet order. The guests were entertained with tea and cakes, which the girls were expected to hand to them. The Gipsy Queen did her part with the others. A few of those present flattered her; a few spoke sensible words; every one had something to say to the girl with the black, interesting eyes, the fine face, the cheeks brilliant with colour. She was different from her companions, who looked, by contrast, almost shadowy.

It was towards evening, and the time for the reading of the essays was approaching. Some of the guests had already given directions for their carriages to be ordered. Immediately after the reading of the essays the visitors would go, and the girls, in a happy mass, would retire to their bedrooms to pack their small trunks for their exodus on the following morning. The great reading was to take place in the large schoolroom, quite the biggest room in the house. Here seats were arranged for the audience, and a platform raised at one end for the girls themselves, who were to occupy the background; for the girl who

was to stand before her audience to read the essays aloud; and for the numerous teachers of the school. It was just as the guests were filing into this big schoolroom that Maggie felt an arm pulling from behind.

'Don't go in with the others,' said a voice. Maggie asked no questions; but she felt her face turning pale, and she knew that her heart was beating very hard. 'Make an excuse—anything,' whispered the same voice again, 'and meet me, just when the others are assembled, in the shrubbery outside the paddock.'

The person who spoke vanished, and Maggie found herself close to Jasmine.

'How splendidly you acted, Maggie!' said Jasmine then. 'I am coming to talk to you in your room to-night. Mrs Howgate has given me permission. I am sure I can manage to take messages home for you; I will somehow, and the holidays won't be long in passing; and when I come back I feel that in some sort of fashion things will be different. Dear Maggie, we will say good-bye to each other to-night.'

'We have said it now,' said Maggie in a reckless tone. 'I don't want you to come to my room, Jasmine, for you are my friend no longer.'

Before Jasmine could reply the sharp, acrid tones of Miss Dunn were heard.

'Order, order, girls! Take your places in the schoolroom. Enter by the left side; go half of

you to the left wing of the platform, and half to the right. Sit down quietly in your places; don't let me hear any more whispering.'

Some one pushed Maggie from behind, but she managed to slip past her.

'I will be back in a minute,' she said.

She loathed herself for telling the unnecessary lie. A baize door was standing ajar; she got behind it. There she stood still while two paths opened before her: the one that of self-denial and self-abnegation, the laying down of all rebellion; the other, the broad and apparently happy road of self-indulgence, defiance, wrong-doing. Oh, but she could not live in the narrow, narrow path, restricted, tortured, unappreciated! Madness would follow such a life. She must have freedom. Had not God made her with a great free heart—one that bounded and leaped and rejoiced in its own strength? She would not be fettered; she would fly—fly!

The face of Jasmine came before her as though in a vision.

'But she is not like me,' thought the girl. 'Although her home is on the hill-top, she has not my wild nature. If she were like me she would never be good.'

There was a distant hubbub of voices, a sound of feet marching past the other side of the baize door, and then dying away into the great school-room. She heard, or fancied she heard, some one

call her name. That was enough; in an instant she had fled. Out of the house she went, no one seeing or thinking about her. She found Priscilla waiting for her in the shrubbery. Priscilla was dressed in her ordinary outdoor clothes, carrying a cloak in her hand.

'You must put this on,' she said the moment she saw Maggie.

'But I can't go away in these things,' said Maggie.

'Yes, they are the very things you can go away in. Come, be quick; hasten! All is well. Follow me.'

The dark cloak enveloped Maggie all over. They entered the fruit and vegetable garden. They passed through it—passed the home of silence in the middle, where Maggie had endured her solitary confinement and finally made up her mind. At the farther end of the garden was a postern door, which was generally kept locked; but to-night it was on the latch. Priscilla raised the latch, glanced at Maggie with an expression of triumph, and they both passed out.

'Freedom!' whispered Priscilla.

Maggie's heart gave a bound. Outside, standing under a tree, was a swarthy-looking gipsy woman.

'This is the young lady, Mother Kinlock,' said Priscilla. 'Is the caravan ready, and are you going to move off at once?'

'We are only waiting for you two sweet young

ladies, my dear,' said the woman. 'Come this minute; the caravan is at the corner of the high-road.'

She took one of Maggie's hands; Priscilla took the other. They ran down the steep path. They found themselves in the high-road. There was a gipsy caravan, covered outside with baskets and chairs and tables made of wickerwork, drawn by a pair of patient horses; and within, a little house, with windows and a chimney. At one end was a swarm of gipsy children, who all crowded to the entrance when Maggie and Priscilla entered.

'You had best come up and sit by the fire, my dears,' said the gipsy woman; and as she spoke she passed up the little house, followed by the two girls. Inside, it reeked of smoke and the mingled fumes of all sorts of cooking. Maggie felt herself gasping for air. She sat down on a bench, and the gipsy children surrounded her. They examined her dress, and fingered it, and laughed, and talked a sort of gibberish, and looked at her out of wild black eyes—eyes as black as sloes. There were two men who occupied the doorway of the caravan, and they were smoking long clay-pipes and helping still further to fill the air with poisonous vapours.

The caravan began to move very slowly. Maggie felt herself choking. If this were freedom, she had never enjoyed herself less in the whole course of her life.

Priscilla, who had seated herself close to her friend, managed to whisper in her ear, 'You don't like this part; but it won't last for ever. We reach the station of Truebridge at twelve o'clock to-night; there is an express train from there to London. No one will dream of looking for us at Truebridge. You must change your clothes, of course; the gipsies will take your things and give you some of theirs. We will travel third class; people will suppose that we are very poor girls. Nothing will matter if we can manage to get to your home.'

'But everything does matter!' whispered Maggie back. 'I wish—oh, I wish I had not come!'

'Your essay has been read by this time. I wonder what you have said in it,' was Priscilla's response.

Maggie sat very still. She knew she had given herself away in that essay. Nothing could ever atone for the words she had uttered.

'Oh,' she said, turning to Priscilla and clutching her hand very tightly, 'I don't want even to go home; let us stay always with the gipsies; let us be wild always.'

'Indeed, we will be nothing of the sort,' said Priscilla. 'If you don't want the comforts of your beautiful home, I do. I am not parting with my money for nothing; so don't you make any mistake on that point. Remember, you have to act fair to me, as I have acted fair to you.—Ah,

Priscilla took a cup of the scalding liquid in her hand.

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thank you, Mother Kinlock; what delicious soup! How lovely it smells!'

Priscilla took a cup of the scalding liquid in her hand. She handed one to Maggie, who was about to reject it, but was warned by a glance from Priscilla to do nothing of the kind. She tried to sip the mixture, which was anything but to her taste. More and more did she pine for air. The caravan jolted on. The children screamed, laughed, cried, quarrelled. By-and-by they lay down under little shelves, on the floor, anywhere, and went to sleep. The men smoked, and kept what little air there was at the entrance of the caravan from coming in.

Maggie, who was so hot at first, felt now a cold dew breaking on her forehead. She said in a gasping voice to Priscilla, 'If I don't get out, or if one of those windows is not opened, I shall faint.'

Priscilla laughed. She felt quite comfortable. She was in the position of one who had played her cards well. She was neither afraid nor remorseful.

'The windows of houses of this sort are not made to be opened,' she said; 'but come, if you like you can stand with the men and the dogs at the entrance.'

Maggie staggered down the caravan. The air outside, although laden with the coarsest kind of tobacco, was preferable to the heat beside the

glowing embers of the fire. There was a time when she had pictured the life of the gipsy as the fairest life on earth, but she changed her mind now. The men at the door of the caravan looked at her, she thought, suspiciously. One of them handled her dress, and another asked if the long gold ear-rings which she had slipped round her ears by means of wires were real or tinsel. When he was told that they were tinsel he took them roughly away and flung them on the road. He then turned his back on the girl, and murmured something to his companion. Priscilla, who was standing close to Maggie, could not understand what he said, but Maggie distinctly heard the words: 'She is worth nothing at all; it's the other who has got the money.'

She did not understand why she felt so frightened when this speech fell on her ears, or why she so ardently wished that Priscilla had heard it; but that young lady, absolutely calm and in the best of spirits, was looking up at the stars, which appeared wonderfully large and bright on this fine summer night. By-and-by Mother Kinlock came up and said that they would get to Truebridge within half-an-hour, and that the young lady who was going on by train had better change her clothes at once. In the meantime she had prepared, she said, two cups of coffee, which she hoped the two dear little ladies would do her the honour of drinking. It was not often that beauti-

ful young ladies like these two paid Mother Kinlock a visit, and she would be terribly offended if they refused her coffee.

Again, impelled by a look from Priscilla, Maggie did gulp down hers. Priscilla took her cup in her hand and drained the contents with quite a graceful movement, and then the disrobing of Maggie began. She had to take off the pretty finery in which she had been attired that day. Once more her hair was screwed up tightly to her head and hair-pinned into a knot at the back, and some very dirty and ill-smelling gipsy clothes were put upon her. In short, she had never been so uncomfortable in the whole course of her life. She was now dressed in very coarse stockings made of a gray sort of wool, and containing several large holes. She had hobnailed shoes on her feet, a size at least too big for her; a coarse wincey gown covered her little person, and a tartan shawl was pinned across her chest. On her head she wore an old hat which might once have been the property of a London flower-girl, so tawdry and dirty and hideous was it. The poor girl felt as if she would sink through the very earth with shame and mortification.

All this time Priscilla sat quite still and comfortable, watching Maggie being transformed from a fanciful gipsy queen into a dirty, slatternly gipsy of the real sort. Her gay clothes were rolled up by Mother Kinlock, and put into a corner of the

den. She complained of their quality, and said that in her opinion she thought the young ladies would wear at least silk, velvet, and satin, and not the sort of things which this young lady chose to make herself a merry-andrew in.

'You worn't the least like a real gipsy, my dear,' she said, as the caravan suddenly stopped outside the railway station at Truebridge. 'But that don't matter, for you look like the real thing now.'

'Here we are,' said Priscilla, rising. She spoke in a queer, far-off, sleepy sort of voice.

Maggie sprang to her feet with alacrity.

'Run down the steps, my dear, and bolt into the station afore anybody sees you. Ask for the up-line, and take your seat third class for London. No one will notice you, if you 're quick and don't look round you, and make the best of things. Good-bye, good-bye. Look sharp, or you 'll lose your train.'

'Come, Priscilla,' said Maggie. She did not even wait to say good-bye to Mother Kinlock. She was so glad to be out of the ill-smelling place that she could think of nothing else for the moment. Into the station she bolted, imagining that Priscilla was following her.

When she found herself inside she looked around her. Where was her companion? Priscilla carried the purse. Priscilla alone could take her to London. But there was no Priscilla anywhere

visible. A wild fear clutched at Maggie's heart. Was she indeed stranded here alone, far, far from Castle Mary, far from the neighbourhood of the hill-top, far from the terrors of the Manor School? Was she stranded here at midnight, penniless, and without a companion?

'Ef yer goin' to London, young wummun,' said one of the porters who happened to be standing near, 'you must look slippy and purchase your ticket, for the train's a-comin' in.'

'Oh, oh!' said Maggie, in a perfect agony of terror, 'but I must find my companion. There is a gipsy caravan—do you know where it has gone?'

The porter, by no means attracted by Maggie's appearance, and having other passengers to attend to, did not even reply to her remarks. She rushed to the door of the station. The caravan, with its load of basket-work, and its gaily painted windows, and its attired horses, was nowhere visible. Maggie stood alone, in the shabbiest, coarsest, dirtiest clothes, looking out on the wide world. She had not a penny to take her to London; she had not a penny to go anywhere. She was lost, if ever child was lost!

'Miss,' said the same porter, who, after all, had kept his eye on the perturbed, queer little figure, 'the train's jist in. You slip into a third class, and give me the money and I'll get ye yer ticket.'

'But I have no money!' said poor Maggie. 'The girl who has the money has been taken on by the gipsies, and I am alone—alone!—lost—lost!'

It was just at that moment that some one, attracted by her voice, came forward, looked curiously for an instant into her changed and bewildered face, and said in a quiet tone, 'Margaret Massereene, what are you doing here?'

'Oh, Lord Dunbar!' whispered the poor child. She burst into a flood of weeping. He took her hand and led her into a waiting-room.

'Porter,' he said to the man, 'take two first-class tickets, for myself and this young lady, to London. Be quick; and please find a compartment where we can be alone.'

Lord Dunbar gave the man some money, and he darted off, eager to oblige the tall gentleman.

Almost before the porter was out of sight Maggie caught Lord Dunbar's hand.

'No, no, no!' she said, 'I won't do that. I won't go back; take me to the Manor School. Do that for me, and I'll—I'll never be naughty any more!'

Lord Dunbar looked at her in amazement.

'Come back, porter!' he shouted to the man. 'It doesn't matter,' he said; 'we don't want the tickets. Here is a shilling. And is there any restaurant here where this young lady and I can have something to eat, or at any rate a quiet room to ourselves?'

The porter said that the room they were now in was at their disposal, and as it was already midnight, there was no other place open at so late an hour.

'Then you shall tell me your story here, Margaret,' said Lord Dunbar.

Poor Maggie! How she told that story she never quite knew.

'I was miserable and tempted, and I wanted to get away,' she said; 'and even Jasmine was not what she used to be to me. But I will go back now; I will submit now. Those three moments when I was alone in the railway station have opened my eyes, and I don't think I want to be naughty ever again.'

Lord Dunbar was a very quiet man. He took Maggie's poor little hot hand in his.

'We have each of us,' he said after a long pause, 'to learn the lesson of life. We learn it after different fashions. We cannot acquire it properly without pain, and the pain is mostly mental. You, Margaret, have had to endure a time of considerable suffering, and the best way that you can learn repentance is by allowing yourself to be disciplined. As to Jasmine Primrose, I am quite certain that her true heart is yours. She, too, has done wrong, but she has repented sooner than you. Remember how I asked you to be patient. Your friendship will be allowed some day.'

'But why was it ever prevented?' said Maggie. 'Why could not my mother and Jasmine's father have allowed us to be friends?'

'There was a story in the past,' said Lord Dunbar, 'which perhaps I may as well tell you, or, at least, I will tell you part of it. It is not the sort of tale which I would best care to tell a child with regard to her mother. It relates to a period when your own mother, being very badly in need of money, gave up the love and affection of Mr Primrose for the man she eventually married —the man who was your father, and who was even then enormously rich. There were circumstances in connection with the story which made Mr Primrose quite determined that his children and hers should not be friends—at least, not with his consent. That is enough for you to know. It is a sad fact that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children; and in this case, although you and Jasmine were innocent, you were both forced to suffer. The story, in reality, greatly injured the life of Mr Primrose, although, of course, he has long recovered, and he loved your own mother most dearly. You must be satisfied with knowing this much; and, also, there is one other thing: that since you were sent to Howgate Manor he has told me that if, after the discipline exercised in that most excellent school, you two girls still wish to be true friends and true comrades in this troublesome world, he will not

withhold his consent. You would, as it were, have proved your friendship by fire. Had you, Margaret, succeeded in your wild enterprise of returning home to-night, you and Jasmine would have indeed been parted for ever. As it is, I have every hope that you must eventually be friends.'

Maggie sat very still while Lord Dunbar was talking. He noticed that her face was white and that she looked deadly tired.

'I wish,' he said after a pause, 'that I had not to take you back to Howgate Manor in your present clothes; but I cannot see that there is any help for it. We ought to go, and soon, for steps must be taken to rescue poor little Priscilla, whose coffee was evidently drugged, or she would have followed you out of the caravan. Now, Margaret, are you willing to taste the cup of humiliation to the very dregs? Is your repentance real, or only sham?'

'I will go through it,' said Margaret in a stout voice, 'and I will not grumble.'

He took her hand.

'God bless you!' he said. 'You are the sort of girl I somehow expected you to be. If you can stand the discipline that lies before you, you will some day be a fine woman, worthy of making and choosing and keeping your own true friends, and worthy of doing a big work in the world. Believe me, Margaret, the rebellious never succeed.

Order is the law of God's world, and order without obedience cannot exist. When you fight against His decrees you, like Saul of old, kick against the pricks. There is no use in it, my child.'

As Lord Dunbar uttered the last words he left the waiting-room. He was gone for about ten minutes. When he returned he told Maggie that they were fifteen miles away from Howgate Manor, but that he was fortunate enough to be able to order a carriage-and-pair which would take them back to the school early in the morning.

'These are summer days,' he said, 'and the light is already breaking in the east. I have desired the carriage to be at the station at four o'clock. We shall reach the Manor about six. Will you lie down here, and let me cover you with my rug, and will you try to rest until I call you?'

'But you have given up all your own plans,' said the girl. 'Oh, how unselfish you are! And I have never thought of you at all until this moment.'

'To tell the truth,' answered Lord Dunbar, 'I had come to Truebridge to see an old friend, and to come on to Howgate Manor to-morrow to have a talk with you, for your mother had told me that you were not to return for the holidays. I had come to the station to say good-bye to my friend, who was going to Scotland by another

train. Just by a series of lucky accidents, coincidences, or what you will, I came across you—you poor little waif and stray! You do not put me out; and if you will permit me, and if Mrs Howgate approves, I will spend part of to-morrow with you at the school.'

'Then I think I can bear life,' said Maggie, with a sigh.

She felt suddenly soothed, strengthened, refreshed; but, oh, so sleepy! Almost before Lord Dunbar left the waiting-room the girl was asleep. When he awoke her in the early hours of that summer morning he noticed, or thought he noticed, a new expression on her face—a look of resolve, also of endurance. He thought of the happy children who were all, from every part of the United Kingdom, going holiday-making, and pitied this poor little stray lamb who was to be dealt with hardly, and yet surely for her own good.

'Come,' he said in a gentle tone, 'it is time.'

Maggie started up and followed her companion half-blindly into the sunshine. The long drive in the open carriage refreshed and stimulated her, and prepared her for the scene which was to await her on her arrival.

Poor Mrs Howgate had not gone to bed that night, and it was she herself who received Lord Dunbar and the runaway when they appeared side by side on the threshold of the house.

'Send this little girl straight up to her room;

order a hot bath for her, and get her into clean clothes without a moment's delay,' said Lord Dunbar, speaking in that tone of authority which he knew so well how to exercise; 'and having done this, will you give her a good meal, nourishing and hot? And afterwards I would speak to you. My name is Dunbar; I am known to many of your friends.'

'Lord Dunbar!' said Mrs Howgate; and even she, unworldly woman as she believed herself to be, was slightly impressed by the majesty of a title. 'Have I indeed the pleasure'——

'You have the pleasure of receiving Maggie Massereene back clothed and in her right mind,' said that nobleman; 'but unless you wish her to be seriously ill, will you attend to my directions without a moment's delay?'

Mrs Howgate looked full at Maggie. Was the colourless face of the head-mistress less colourless than usual? And was there a gleam of something which betokened true feeling in her hard, gray eyes? Her words at least were gentle enough.

'You have terrified me as I never was terrified before, Margaret,' she said; 'but come in.—Lord Dunbar, your wishes shall be obeyed.—Miss Dunn, Margaret Massereene has returned; ask her no questions, but take her upstairs and attend to her comforts.—Now, Lord Dunbar, will you follow me?'

Lord Dunbar did follow the lady, and in her own special sanctum sanctorum he said several things about Maggie which opened Mrs Howgate's eyes. He told her also what little he knew about Priscilla, and steps were immediately taken to follow the caravan and rescue that unhappy child.

Eventually she was found and brought back to the school. But Mrs Howgate did not want to have too many rebellious pupils, and asked her parents to remove Priscilla from her very select school. This was accordingly done almost immediately, and Priscilla and Maggie had never anything more to do with each other in their journey through life.

As to Maggie herself, she was ill, stupid, inert, for a few days, hardly speaking, hardly eating. It is true that when she bade Lord Dunbar goodbye she said to him, 'I will endure; I will submit.'

And he had replied, as he took her little hand, 'And in so doing, you will conquer.'

There is no saying, but perhaps in the long-run Maggie did conquer, not easily or quickly, for hers was a difficult nature. Her temptations were many, her impulses passionate and strong, her affections unbridled. But slowly, although surely, she learned to love the Manor School; its narrow life seemed to her to widen as she came to view it more closely; its discipline became at once its charm and its power. She learned to read behind Mrs Howgate's calm, unmoved face,

and to see traces of some of the storms of life when few, without close observation, could perceive them. In short, this extraordinary girl found herself in touch with the head-mistress. When these things happened all went well with Maggie. She worked for love's sake, and when that is a real motive what can it not achieve?

Mrs Howgate could, in her way, be generous; and she never said a single word to Maggie with regard to that essay which the girl had written in her wild rebellion, and which had so distressed her, and put her in a measure to open shame in the school. But gradually and surely, as the weeks and months went by, the girl and the woman began to understand each other. Mrs Howgate condescended to teach Maggie herself, and found, to her delight, how rich was that uncultivated soil, and how magnificent the possibilities which lay within the girl's nature. The girl herself, too, reacted on the mistress, and brought out the best that was in her.

When Jasmine returned at the end of the holidays she found a bright and happy Maggie awaiting her.

'Why, I have grown while you were away,' she said, 'and not only in body but in mind; and I am quite cheerful now, and I don't mind a bit doing without things. I think it is good for me—for my mind, I mean.'

'And I have some news for you,' said Jasmine.

'Father says that after your splendid conduct in going back of your own freewill to the Manor when you might have left it for ever—for Lord Dunbar was quite willing to take you back to London and to restore you to your mother—he cannot forbid our friendship. So we will just be friends for ever and ever; for there never was anybody like you, Maggie Massereene. For me, even my own sisters don't seem to fit to me as closely as you do.'

'And you belong to me,' said Maggie. 'I am glad we are working here together. This is the home of discipline; but never mind, it is but preparing us for the big world.'

'Where God's discipline surrounds us,' said Jasmine.

'And God's love,' said Maggie.

Then they kissed each other solemnly and clasped each other's hands, and made that solemn vow—silent, irrevocable—which needs no words, and which one heart can convey to the other.

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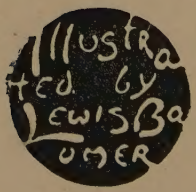

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